

***** 1 ABY *****

To: Eddriss Sark, Alliance Intelligence
From: Milo Thirk, Intelligence Bureau Chief, Bepin System
Subject: Intelligence Report, Lando Calrissian

Dear Ed,

Here's the info on the new Cloud City Administrator, Lando Calrissian. Unless I'm totally mistaken, we can definitely deal with this guy. He may not be totally honest, but I think he's honorable. Look this stuff over and get back to me. Januaris sends her love.

Thirk

P.S. Please note that I got most of this info directly from Calrissian himself as small talk during several friendly sabacc games (in which he won 5,700 credits; see attached expense voucher). As he is possibly the biggest and best liar in the entire galaxy, myself excluded, take it with a ton of Serrian salt.

Only Droids Serve The Maker

"Vessel on lunar bypass," crackled the comlink. "This is Kline Security, vessel three-niner. Broadcast your entry permit data."

"Uh-oh," grunted Woyiq. "Bad company."

Daye Azur-Jamin yanked himself upright. His leg braces whirled to adjust. Monor II dominated the viewscreen, opaline atmosphere concealing its five continents.

The Rebel tugship was an aging clunker, and it smelled like old sweat. Daye's team had hoped to slip through the system, camouflaged by dozens of similar craft. "Do we answer?" he asked.

"That or be shot," said Toalar. Rebel gunrunner Una Poot had given Toalar an altered transponder code, but she'd warned him not to put much faith in it... or the entry permit. Toalar clawed the control board. "Transmitting now." The Gotal spoke in monotones, but he would've passionately defended anyone's freedom. His perceptor cones resembled thick horns. Gray-brown folds crossed his face where humans wore noses.

On a nearby moon, Toalar and Woyiq had just cached 10,000 blaster carbines and two powerful explosives. Monor II was occupied by the Empire. Toalar still had to launch a small pod telling Monor's native sentients, the Sunesis, where to pick up those weapons. Una had ordered him to use a message pod, rather than transmit subspace, to avoid Imperial

interception. Their odds of being hailed at all had seemed astronomically small. This was evil luck.

Woyiq rubbed his cheeks with big, hairy hands. "They're taking too long, blast them." Woyiq had competed in Imperial wrestling tournaments. He and Toalar behaved like a life-debt pair, though neither discussed what bonded them. Muscular legs bulged as Woyiq leaned forward.

Envious, Daye gripped his leg braces. Outside his flight suit, stiff metal strips joined alloy rods that pierced his leg bones. The automatons were droid-slaved to an implant low on his spine.

Daye had sabotaged his own armament plant, rather than let the Empire seize control. Toalar had found him half-dead under rubble and spirited him offworld. At remote Silver Station, an Imperial raid had interrupted bacta treatment that'd repaired his hand and almost restored one crushed leg. Rebel medics later braced both legs, and replaced his shattered shoulder; but cranial damage left him 85 percent blind in his right eye, with blurred vision in the left. Restoring full vision would have required surgery that those medics weren't equipped to perform. They implanted a clip in his left cheekbone, enabling him to wear a temporary, high-powered monolens. He was learning to ignore his right eye's misty tunnel vision.

"Maybe we can outrun them." Toalar was already vectoring past the moon, drawing Kline Security away from that weapons cache.

Security responded. "Your code is not locally known. Stand by for boarding."

Daye poised both hands over the armament board.

"Hold fire," said Toalar. "We'll need full engine power." He jabbed a control. "Pod away." Much of the tugship's momentum would transfer to that half-meter alloy pod, speeding it toward Monor's surface. "In five seconds, we'll clear gravity--"

The tugship shuddered. Daye plunged forward against narrow seat restraints.

Toalar hit another panel. "Tractor beam," he droned. Daye plainly felt Toalar's anger, echoed by Woyiq; Una's lessons had accomplished that much. "Hold fire, Daye. That won't help now."

"You over there." The comlink crackled again. "Kill your engines. Prepare for armed boarding. Cooperate or be shot. We don't care which."

"We will cooperate," Toalar answered. He cut the connection. "Daye, you're on deck," he murmured. "Una says Administrator Fuguée detains casual smugglers, asks a few questions,

and then sentences them to menial labor. This was always a possibility. We'll eventually get off-planet."

Daye frowned. Toalar, like Una, believed too strongly in Daye's minor Force-sensitivity. Una had survived a husband who'd known a little about using the Force. She'd recruited Daye for his sensitivity, despite his injuries.

But he couldn't manipulate all conversations. "A few questions?" he asked.

Toalar smoothed gray fur over his knobby brows. "Just convince Fuguée we're no threat."

Back on Druckenwell, Daye had been considered a good character-judge. Only Tinian I'att had realized that he could faintly sense others' feelings --

Tinian. He shut his eyes. He'd loved her courage, creativity, and light heart. She'd loved armament work, casual clothes, and uptempo music ... and, amazingly, him. It hurt to remember himself as Tinian had known him, before Moff Eisen Kerioth destroyed their lives. At I'att Armament, she'd been heiress-apparent. He'd been her second under-supervisor, skilled at design and administration. She'd caressed the prematurely gray streak in his left eyebrow and teased: without it, he'd have looked too fresh-faced to command her employees.

No risk of that now. He flexed his aching shoulder. Moff Kerioth had dragged one leg ... but without mechanized help, Daye could only crawl. Furthermore, his monolens gave him all the charm of a speeder with one headlamp.

At least Tinian had escaped whole, thanks to Daye and a Wookiee bodyguard. He had not seen her since then. She must never know he'd survived. He meant to spend himself serving the Rebellion, and then rest ... forever.

There was nothing on board this tugship worth trying to jettison. They could only wait. Monor II, listed on newer Imperial registers as Kline Colony, lay helpless before Imperial planet-rapists. Chemical engineers coveted its cirrifog, a perpetual, glittering haze of crystals so light that they floated in Monor's atmosphere. Daye adjusted his monolens' adjustment ring for maximum distance. The iridescent atmosphere focused.

So did the other ship, growing slowly onscreen. Its long, thin shape, thicker at both ends, resembled an in-system hauler.

He preferred staring at the planet. Monor's native Sunesis had furry, speechless, intelligent juveniles with diffuse nervous systems. At about 15 standard years, they stopped eating and pupated. Some never awoke, but most metamorphosed into hairless adults. Mature mouthparts let them speak Basic. They also used ultra-sound.

Like many sentient species, they had squabbled for centuries. Now their priest-prince, Agapos the Ninth, was inciting them to unite and revolt. Sunesian juveniles needed cirrifog to pupate successfully, and the Empire threatened to take it all. Agapos' writings were so eloquent -- so universally relevant -- that several planetary undergrounds relayed every transmission. On board Una's ship, Daye had accessed several quotes. He particularly liked: "Ye that oppose not only tyranny but the tyrant, stand forth! The New Order seeks to hunt down Lady Freedom. Let us receive this bold fugitive. Let us fight boldly alongside her!"

The Empire had responded with a death bounty.

The security ship eclipsed Monor II. Daye's legs whirled as he slumped.

"Don't worry," Toalar murmured. "Administrator Fuguée won't give us much trouble."

* * *

The first man through the airlock wore a trooper's black uniform. "Phew." He pinched his nose. "Look, Lieutenant Karr. Half a stinkin' droid. Where's the other half?"

The next boarder wore the two-color insignia of a naval lieutenant. "So it is," he snorted, lounging against the starboard bulkhead as two more men boarded. "You're going to wish you'd tried smuggling in some other system, boys. Administrator Brago despises your kind."

Brago ... not Fuguée? "We're not smugglers," Daye insisted. Gunrunners was the proper term ...

Toalar added, "We need repairs. We found out too late there's no--"

"Tell Brago." Karr, lean and thirtyish, picked his teeth with a long metal sliver. "You launched a message pod. I say you're smuggling." Una's informer must've guessed right: the Empire was preparing to wipe out the Sunesis. Why else would it send in a tough new administrator? They *must* get those weapons. He must stall this crew until Una's message pod vanished into Monor's atmosphere.

"Take 'em on board," snapped Lieutenant Karr.

Woyiq whooped. He swung his beefy arms in long, powerful arcs. Two troopers flew against bulkheads. They slumped to the deck before a third Imperial stunned Woyiq.

Karr kept picking his teeth. The third trooper, a red-haired boy who looked more scared than fierce, prodded Woyiq with one boot. The big human didn't move ... but he'd bought 15 valuable seconds.

Karr raised a comlink. "Keehon, send another squad. I've got three masses to drag." He scratched his chin with his comlink, eyeing Daye and Toalar. "Care to make it five, boys?"

Daye shifted, balancing. If Toalar twitched a whisker, he'd jump too. The droid legs were phenomenally strong.

Toalar raised his clawed hands, meek for the moment. "Better," observed Karr. "Conor, take them through."

The young trooper twitched his blaster. Daye shuffled through the airlock. Someone seized his arms from behind and snapped on binders. Toalar, too, was grabbed quickly. The young trooper walked them up a short corridor to the patrol craft's bridge. "Sit." He gestured toward a gap between lashed cargo piles along one bulkhead.

At least it smelled better over here. Daye cooperated as slowly as he dared, and the trooper didn't rush him. He cabled Toalar's and Daye's binders to lockdown rings. Another group dragged in Woyiq, wrestled him upright, and secured him. Woyiq's head lolled.

Lieutenant Karr stepped onto the bridge. "Disengage."

With a heavy *ka-chunk*, the Imperial craft loosed Una Poot's tugship. Karr stalked to an overhead viewscreen. "Spot that pod," he barked.

Una's ship plunged into view. Maybe its mass would hide the pod. A dark young man grasped handgrips that protruded from his station. "Sir, permission to fire?"

"Blast away."

White light lashed space. Una's clunker dissolved into wreckage. "Come on," growled the Lieutenant. "Half rations for all of you if nobody spots that pod."

Daye faintly caught the troopers' dislike and distrust.

"I see it!" exclaimed the young red-haired trooper. "Heading six-five by two."

Daye clenched his binders. The dark gunner squeezed his handgrips again. "Target destroyed."

Which target? Daye wondered frantically. Debris or the message pod? The gunner's sense felt just wrong.

"About time," Karr snapped. "This is the slowest crew I've ever had. Set course for Kline Colony."

Karr marched Daye's group down a long gray corridor to a long gray room. Behind the bulkhead-gray desk sat a human with black hair and a short neck.

Lieutenant Karr saluted. "Here they are, Administrator." Through the monolens, still adjusted for long distances, the Administrator's rank patch was a long red and blue blur.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," he purred. "At ease." He glared at his prisoners. "What was your cargo?"

Daye stared. This wasn't the scenario they'd rehearsed.

"We didn't get much cooperation with boarding, either." Karr had drawn his toothpick again.

"The pod was destroyed?"

"Affirmative, sir."

Brago laced his fingers and leaned back. "Which of you is the boss?" He dismissed Woyiq, who stood wobbling from the stun bolt, with a scornful glance. "The Gotal, I think? You Rebels always put oddballs in charge. Are you spying for the lumpheads?"

The Sunesis' prominent cranial melon was used for ultrasound. *Lumpheads*. "We're not spies." Daye listened hard. Brago's hostility remained steady.

"Interrogate the Gotal, Lieutenant. We can terminate them all after the feast. Make it festive."

Lieutenant Karr saluted again, then jerked Daye's arm. "Move, droid."

"Droid?" echoed the Administrator.

"It's mostly human above the belt, sir," Karr explained, "but look at these legs."

Brago peered over his desk, then looked up. Daye squinted into unnaturally green eyes. "What happened to you?" Brago asked.

Daye shrugged. "Explosion."

"Saboteur?" Brago cocked an eyebrow.

Daye smiled inwardly. In Agapos' words, "Liberty's flame must be fueled with our blood, mingled with that of the tyrants."

Brago waved a hand. "Lock them up."

As they passed a guarded double-door into a blind corridor, Daye murmured to Karr, "Is Administrator Brago liked?"

"That doesn't concern you."

"He's not well."

"You may be right." Karr laughed. "Stop."

The young, red-haired trooper reached for a black wall panel. A door slid open. Karr shoved Daye through, and it shut with a boom. Still hindered by his binders, he backed up to a wall. He slid down onto the bare, windowless cell's floor.

Now what? Since fleeing Druckenwell, he'd lost track of days. New Year's Fete must be starting. One of several Imperial festivals, it was widely celebrated with heavy eating, drinking, and spicing.

He, Toalar, and Woyiq would be after-dinner entertainment if he didn't think of something. He looked hard at himself, hoping to find steel. He did not want to amuse Brago by begging for mercy.

Within minutes, two other troopers arrived. One had brown hair and a drooping mustache. "Brago wants the droid parts." He pointed a blaster at Daye's braces. "Souvenir."

They whirred as Daye struggled to his feet. Without them, he'd be as helpless as a newborn Talz. "Leave them for now," he pleaded. So much for steel. "Leave me my dignity."

The paunchy blonde trooper lunged. Adrenaline overrode Daye's common sense. Halfway into a lunge kick, he realized he'd overextended. The super-strong droid legs threw him. He crumpled on one side.

The blonde jumped from behind and rolled him onto his stomach. "I thought you'd try that," he grunted. He settled his bulk on Daye's shoulders, his hands on Daye's hip bones. Daye clawed the rough floor. The binders made him doubly helpless, twisting his wrists.

The mustached trooper drew a wicked-looking tool from his hip belt. He knelt on Daye's left ankle and started prying.

Daye gritted his teeth, summoning that steel. *Our blood fuels liberty's flame*, he reminded himself. Through his nerve block, he felt only pressure as the trooper wrenched rods from his bones.

The paunchy blonde leaned hard on his hips, then sprang off. Daye pushed up on both elbows. Sweat slithered down his forehead. The blonde guard stepped away. "Going to give us the glass eye? Or do we take it our way?"

Something whirred in the near distance. Daye's wrists relaxed. Half-hearted, he sat up and slid off the binders. Much help hands would be, if he were blind and lame. He pressed his left cheek, releasing the clip. The duracrete floor and walls became gray blurs.

The trooper snatched his lens and binders, then tossed something aside. His partner stepped down with a sickening crunch. "Karr has decided to send you back to the Maker," he announced. "Wait'll you see what we do with old droids."

They left.

Slowly, Daye stretched his arms. He rubbed his wrists. Then he squinted at his thin, limp legs. Already atrophied, they bled at the joints.

He didn't intend to die without a fight, though his effort might be laughable. Rebels were terminated every day, in pockets of resistance all over the Empire. Daye only wished he'd accomplished more. He wondered what Karr planned.

I'att Armament had sold old droids for parts, but Daye had heard of huge Imperial acid vats and settling tanks, from which composites and metals were reclaimed. If they meant to dump him into one of those, he'd dissolve before he could drown.

Where was Una Poot? Not that he hoped to be rescued, but he wished he could tell her what'd happened. His musical friends, Cheeve and Yccakic, had traveled on with the Rebel medics. Hopefully, Cheeve's wife Twilit would join them at the medics' cushy retirement station. *The ultimate gig.*

Daye was glad he could still smile. He tugged up one shipsuit leg. His ankle had stopped bleeding. He rolled over and started circling the cell, dragging himself with his forearms. He mustn't give up. Some whooping stranger dashed past his door. The feast must be underway. Daye laid his cheek on rough, cold duracrete. When was the last time he'd seen Tinian happy? Young-looking with shoulder-length, red-gold hair, she'd worn the white chest protector and shoulder pauldrons of Imperial stormtrooper armor. Daye and Tinian's grandfather had invented a new way to dissipate blaster fire. Naive in their trust, Tinian and her grandparents had believed that the Empire would offer a lucrative contract.

Instead, Moff Eisen Kerioth executed Tinian's grandparents and seized the plant. Daye and Tinian would have become his slaves if they hadn't escaped. He'd wanted her to build a new life, far from the Empire's leprous grasp.

He'd seen her once more, from a great distance. Silver Station had been drifting apart under Imperial attack. Woyiq had just carried him aboard Una Poot's escape ship, the *Sitting Duck*. A small, saucer-shaped scout had flitted across the *Duck's* viewscreen, and despite a weak particle shield -- and energy shields with peculiar frequency gaps -- that saucer destroyed a TIE fighter before vanishing into hyperspace. Una had claimed Tinian was on board. She'd found another Wookiee protector: *Chenlambec*, Una pronounced, *is no ordinary bounty hunter*.

He rolled onto his back. He'd tried to forget that. His spirited fiancée had joined a bounty hunter instead of finding a place to lie low.

"We are not afraid to follow truth wherever it leads," Agapos had written. "We will even tolerate error, so long as our minds are left free to combat it."

But he feared Tinian had made a grave judgment error.

* * *

Chenlambec thumbed a lock of silver-tipped brown facial fur out of his lightweight breathing mask. Billions of microcrystals floated in every cubic meter of air. One deep, unfiltered breath would've shredded his lungs. By daylight, Monor II dazzled the eyes. Tonight, no star glimmer penetrated.

Tinian adjusted her own mask. Built like a half-grown cub, his new apprentice was ferocious for a human. Chen had also lost most of his family to Imperial attacks, but Tinian was unstable, stunned by grief for her murdered grandparents and chosen life-mate. She'd begun to recover, then relapsed ... repeatedly, for no obvious reason. He suspected nightmares.

"I still don't like it that we didn't pick up any lifeforms," she grumbled. "Are you sure your contact found the right location?"

He crooned softly: this was the place. A sentry must have spotted them.

"We're not even picking up anything underground."

A metal chamber wouldn't show on scanners against a major ore vein. Did she want to wait on board?

"Not me." Over her plain black shipsuit, she straightened her diagonal belt. Two cargo pockets bulged opposite the blaster he'd given her: no I'att, unfortunately, but an inexpensive Merr-Sonn.

Stepping quietly, Chen rounded the *Wroshyr's* pitted hull. Tinian constantly urged him to upgrade his scoutship. She might have been an expert with explosives, but she still didn't understand hunt-trade credit flow.

They groped through warm fog to the cliff's base. "Well," Tinian muttered, "here's a door. But it's magnetically sealed."

Finding this site had taken fast work. Imperial forces jammed all transmissions out of Agapos' defended headquarters, trying to silence the priestly firebrand. But manifestos kept appearing. Chen's Rebel contacts had deduced a secret transmitter. They'd found a remarkably straight ore vein, precisely twice as long as his outsystem transmission frequency, 70 kilometers away. It must be functioning as a mammoth dipole antenna.

"Prennerin." Tinian sniffed. Even through her filter, she must've scented the Sunesis' explosive. "Not the best linear control."

He suggested it may have been all they could afford.

She rolled her eyes. Wisps of red-blond hair dangled over her breath filter's strap.

Chen's source had insisted Agapos would transmit tonight, and Chen had seen no vehicle tracks. Agapos' entourage must be avoiding scanner-visible mechanization.

He rumbled an order. "What, Chen?"

Growling, he corrected her.

"All right," she sighed. "What, *Ng'rhr*?" She copied his inflection well, for a human.

Uncle. He must be her family. She'd never had a clan, not even parents.

He repeated his instruction, then plucked a tiny, silvery cube from between the quarrels on his lizard-hide bandolier. Tinian slid a hand along the wall. "I'm looking," she murmured, "but I don't see a power point."

"Keep looking," chirped the cube.

Chen patted Flirt good-naturedly. Smaller than a restraining bolt, Flirt was a functioning droid. Chen's previous hunt partner had programmed Flirt to seduce an intelligent computer, subvert its security, or change commands. She needed only a nearby power access. Chen returned her to her bandolier perch.

"Guess you'll want me, then." Tinian dug in a cargo pocket. "That depends," piped up Flirt. Chen hushed her.

Seconds later, Tinian sprinted away from the cliff. "Get back," she urged. "Count 10."

Chen crouched behind thick, succulent greenery that gave off a floral scent. Another alien fragrance, biting with a sea-tang, must be the Sunesis, closer to amphibians than mammals.

He told Tinian to recheck her blaster.

She peered down. "Stun," she agreed. Chen hunted by tough rules. It would take skill, luck, and timing to snatch Agapos from his bodyguards without injuring anyone.

Thunder rattled the tropical night. Chen rushed the door. It hung loose on one side. He thrust in his climbing claws and tore it off. They sprinted down a steep, misty tunnel. He hoped he didn't lose Tinian. If she lasted five minutes under fire, she might survive her apprenticeship. He'd have liked to just lob in a gas grenade, but he distrusted Sunesian biology. He couldn't risk killing Agapos.

"I must study war," Agapos had written, "so that my offspring may study economics and astrology. They ought to study economics and astrology, philosophy and agriculture, to give their offspring a right to study painting, poetry, and porcelain." With very little editing, Chen could have quoted that on Kashyyyk.

Tinian waved her small luma at gray-flecked white stone. "Their blast points aren't bad," she conceded, whispering. Another massive door ended the tunnel. "Here, Flirt." She spotted a metal circle near floor level.

"About time," chirped Flirt.

Grunting satisfaction, Chen pressed her prong into the power point. Inside her titanium shell, every non-positronic centimeter bulged with sensor and antenna windings. Her only downfall - besides being jealous -- was inconsistency. Occasionally, simple-seeming tasks took the tiny droid hours to accomplish.

"You're in, boss," she squeaked. "All security systems are down." He asked two more questions.

"Nope," she answered primly. "No other way out. And you've got six people inside."

"Layout?" Tinian asked.

"One room. Transmitter against the left wall. Eight chairs. Don't trip."

Chen passed Flirt to Tinian. Flirt buzzed protest, but if they needed her inside, Tinian -- built lower -- could plug her in quicker. He brandished his blaster and yipped an order.

The door slid open. Cirrifog glittered to life in the corridor. Someone shrieked.

Tinian dropped to the dirt and crawled forward. "Careful!" screeched Flirt. "You'll scratch me!"

Chen counted five. Then he leaped into the center of the doorway and whirled, firing stun bolts at anything turquoise.

The Sunesis brandished primitive weapons. *Avoiding scanners*, he observed calmly. Arrows whizzed. He dodged, spun, kept shooting.

Fire plunged through his bandolier into his chest. "Boss!" shrieked Flirt.

Tinian shrieked, too. She'd lost home, love, and family. If she never cherished anyone or anything again -- not even survival -- the Empire couldn't hurt her.

But without Chen, she'd have no reason to fight on. She dropped Flirt, sprang up, and gripped her miserable Merr-Sonn blaster. Blood gushed from Chen's grizzled chest. A dark green stick protruded from the wound.

Feeling more Wookiee than human, she pumped out stun bolts. The chamber was so small she barely noticed the fog. "Look out!" trilled a voice at one side. "Two of them!"

She glanced at the silver-robed alien. Unarmed. Two turquoise figures sprawled on the dirt. Stunned. But another perched atop a metal chair, brandishing a forearm-length knife. He shifted gangly legs to leap. Chen had rolled away to grope for the blaster he'd dropped.

She fired. The alien fell short. His knife clattered on the stone floor.

A blaster bolt whizzed over her head, no diffuse stun bolt, but focused to kill. Now who -- ?

"Stop!" trilled the voice again. "Leave us in peace!"

She swung her blaster, searching for that final target. The transmitter console, a wall of primitive knobs and dials, stood out a meter from the rock wall.

Chenlambec ripped out the bloody shaft. Its barbed point glistened red. Much to her relief, he roared defiance. Blood streaked his silver-tipped fur.

"Behind the transmitter," Tinian shouted.

Chen roared again. He seized the transmitter bank and rocked it. Tinian stunned the final Sunesis as their protection crashed away. "Now," she panted, turning, "we'll deal with you."

Agapos stood unflinching. She had to admire his composure. Over round black eyes, silvery crests and bulges set off his turquoise skin like jewelry.

"There's a price on your head," she panted. The breath filter was choking her.

"You have won it."

Chen growled. "Come on," Tinian translated. "Hurry."

"Your partner is injured," trilled the priest-prince.

"Right," Tinian snapped. "The sooner we're back on board our ship, the better." And where on that rustbucket were the medpacs? "You move."

Chen roared agreement.

"I am ready to die," Agapos said calmly, "but I will not be taken." She shoved hair out of her face. "We're not that kind," she insisted, "but we don't have time to chat."

The Sunesi strolled toward Chen. Almost slaving, Chen heaved deep, shaking breaths. The Sunesi extended a four-fingered, turquoise hand and shut his eyes. Chen bared his teeth.

Agapos touched his bleeding chest. Chen rubbed it. Then he cooed.

"You're kidding," she exclaimed. She glared at the Sunesi. "What did you do?"

"My last gift to my executioner," he said steadily, "besides forgiveness. He will carry no scar but the memory of his crime. If I had a weapon, I would shoot you both down. Having none, I can only refuse to cooperate." He raised both long hands over his bulbous head. "Earn your blood money, and murder me. But my words live."

Evidently he'd rather be blasted than go with a raging Wookiee and a half-crazed human girl.

Her trigger finger twitched. "Have it your way." Agapos crumpled. Chen shook his shaggy head as if wrested from rapture. He crooned a question.

"I'm fine," she snapped. "Come on."

Recovering, he pulled a large medjector from his bandolier pouch. He drew 20 mils of Agapos' bright pink blood and squirted the chairs, walls, and transmitter wreckage. After capping the collector, he returned it to his pouch. He hoisted the limp, stunned alien over one shoulder and sprinted toward the shaft.

Tinian scooped up Flirt and followed.

"Dirt!" Flirt screeched. "Don't forget dirt!"

She paused at the tunnel's entry to scrabble a handful of soil mixed with settled cirrifog. If anyone challenged them, they could prove they'd been to Kline Colony.

The *Wroshyr*'s landing lights flashed on. Cirrifog danced in their beams.

Daye would have called it exquisite. He'd had a keen eye for beauty. It'd overjoyed her when he called her lovely. His long, strong hands had held her so gently ...

She would never stop grieving him. Never. Never. Chen's roar drifted out the hatch.

"Coming!" Blinded by tears, she groped toward the light. "I'm coming, Ng'rhr!"

* * *

Daye eyed a mottled gray blotch on the floor. This duracrete had cured so poorly that even without his monolens he had no trouble seeing it -- but he hadn't been able to pound through. An anemic lumipanel lit the air filter. He couldn't reach either of them. Administrator Brago hadn't announced the impounding of Una Poot's weapons. Maybe the Sunesis still stood a fighting chance. Maybe Brago was just busy eating.

"There is something odious in government from off planet," Daye remembered from Agapos' essays. "We demand leaders of our own kind, whose juveniles pupate alongside our own. Only they will consider our future." With a little minor editing, he could have rebroadcast that on Druckenwell.

He wished he might have met one of the Sunesis. He'd heard that metamorphosis predisposed them to believe in life after death. He wished he believed it now. He'd be glad for a rest, but here, he'd realized that he dreaded extinction.

Footsteps stopped outside his door. He braced himself against the wall.

Two lanky, turquoise-skinned people burst in, carrying blurs that resembled blasters. A silver shape followed, roughly humanoid, obviously mechanical. Finally appeared the young, red-haired trooper. Daye's apprehension metamorphosed into hope. In the Force, this youngster felt brave -- determined -- and helpful. "Conor?" It couldn't be ...

"My name is Urek. We've got to get you out of here."

He recognized the name: Una Poot's Rebel contact, who'd infiltrated during Fuguée's tenure! He'd been the one who "spotted" their message pod, too.

"Come on," the youth urged. "The men I stunned won't stay down forever."

"Can't use my legs," Daye warned him. "Hardly at all."

Urek glanced through the open cell door. "Carry him, Aiteff." The droid rolled closer on narrow treads. Urek and one Sunesi lifted Daye. The droid bent his arms to a chairlike angle. "Try to be comfortable," Aiteff intoned, "but secure. We must hurry."

Daye sat sideways and wrapped both arms around Aiteff's shoulders. "I'm on," he urged. "Go."

The long-limbed Sunesis highstepped out. Aiteff followed. In the corridor waited another group: several more turquoise blurs, two metallic droid-shapes, three humans -- one with a burly wrestler's build -- and a Gotal.

"Hurry." One Sunesi beckoned with a gray-clad arm. Daye squinted so hard it made his head ache. This one had delicate brow crests and was probably female. "In courage is strength!" she hissed.

"Praise the Maker," responded Daye's droid -- and his biological companions. Aiteff rolled forward. The others sprinted.

But only droids served the Maker ... or so Daye had believed. He'd heard that Agapos' people let droids and humans live among them as equals. Had they also adopted the droids' quasi-deity?

"I usually carry Daye," Woyiq offered.

"No time," Urek puffed. "Keep running. Got to get back to my post. Sorry about stunning you. Shipboard. Self-defense!"

"No harm," Woyiq grunted.

The group turned right, away from Brago's office. Daye watched behind. They took another right turn. Black blurs appeared from a side passage. "Troopers!" he cried.

"Go!" exclaimed the small Sunesi. Most of the group pelted on. She and two droids fell behind, drawing weapons. Woyiq lingered with them. Daye clung to his droid. His helplessness humiliated him.

Aiteff plunged into a lift shaft. They rode up several levels, then dashed along another corridor. "Where is everybody?" Daye asked.

"They were eating." The droid sounded smug, having no such need. "Administrator Brago promised a feast. Urek knew it was our chance."

The lead runners reached a door. Stunned troopers lay scattered around it. "Trade entry." Aiteff maneuvered between uniformed bodies. "Hold your breath!"

They plunged through. Daye went totally blind in a dense gray fog. Feathery crystals caressed his cheeks and hands as the droid rolled ahead. He heard -- or was he imagining? -- high-pitched squeals in all directions. Ultrasound would be helpful in murky air.

Aiteff clanged through a hatch Daye hadn't seen coming and dropped him on a seat, then extended a blocky arm and snatched a pair of nostril filters off a bulkhead. Daye jammed them in, then squinted at another dark shape. Toalar stood beside a hatch, brandishing an alien-design blaster. This small shuttle had four seating rows. He hoped it had shields.

One Sunesi guarded the airlock with Toalar. "Nee's coming," the alien shrilled.

"The small one?" Daye asked.

The Sunesi nodded. He wiped his bulging forehead.

"Is she your leader?"

The Sunesi nodded again. "One of Agapos' close disciples. A light in our darkness. We will not leave her to the enemy."

Another Sunesi clenched the transport's controls. "He will not abandon thee, but will guide thee and strengthen."

"Through the thickest of nights," three others whispered.

Daye was glad the Sunesis spoke Basic. Evidently he wasn't going to die, after all ... not yet. "Toalar, are you all right?" Brago had ordered Toalar interrogated.

The Gotal shrugged. "Nothing I haven't been through before. He's no--"

Two droids barreled on board; then Woyiq, carrying the small, slender Nee. "Medpac," he rasped. "They got her."

Nee's left arm hung limp. Pink fluid dripped from her four long fingers. She slapped an airlock panel with her uninjured hand, trilling loudly.

The transport lurched. Nee's huge eyes closed, and her thin silver lips moved. Another Sunesi struggled toward her against acceleration.

She bled from her upper arm, near her shoulder. What kind of weapons were the Imperials using on these people? Daye flushed, wishing he could ease her pain. He knew what it meant to be injured.

"Got a medpac?" growled Woyiq.

"Hush." A Sunesi slipped him two nostril filters.

Nee was singing. "*Viumbay, viotay. Sifu.*" A long pause, then she sang again.

Distraction technique, Daye guessed. It might be a long flight to her medic. Her companion laid a hand on her arm. "*Sifu,*" she sang. "*Sifu.*"

"Toalar," Woyiq exclaimed. "Got a medpac?"

"Wait!" Daye squinted harder. Beneath Nee's scorched sleeve, turquoise skin was knitting before his eyes. Blood stopped dripping. What were they doing?

"Praise this making," Nee's compatriot intoned in Basic.

Nee raised her head. "Glory greater than the stars," she sang. "Ye are never forsaken."

Woyiq gaped. Daye stretched out through the Force. Nee's presence pulsed powerfully. She'd just healed herself ... and come through refreshed, not weakened.

"Put me down," she directed.

"Whatever you say, lady." Woyiq obeyed.

Nee staggered toward the pilot's console. The shuttle bucked. Daye guessed they were dodging fire. If Sunesis used ultrasound for everyday communication, their radar must be exceptional.

And they *healed* themselves. He stared at Nee's bulbous head. This disciple did, anyway. Daye clenched his legs. Could he do the same.... using the Force?

Jedi had, he knew from whispered folklore. Nee was obviously strong in the Force.

Was he?

He couldn't even imagine restoring his atrophied legs. But one medic had said his good eye might refocus in time, even if he did not reach a surgical droid. The worst damage had affected nerves deep in his skull.

He closed both eyes. He tried grasping the Force and bringing it to bear on the throbbing ache behind his temples.

Nothing happened.

Nee's song hung in his mind. Maybe the Sunesis' local deity, or spirit, or healing field might take pity on an injured human. "*Viumbay*," he sang silently, "*viotay. Sifu*." The transport jolted. He grabbed his narrow armrests and opened his eyes.

Between his seat and the pilot's, tiny crystals swirled and glittered.

He blinked. He squinted. Neither made any difference. Both of his eyes had focused -- he was seeing three dimensions!

Toalar moaned and rubbed his perceptor cones. "What is it?" Daye asked, only half-believing.

"Headache," answered Toalar. "But it's fading."

Gotals felt the Force through those cones. Daye leaned back. What had he done? Or had he? Was there an outside power here, as his grateful instinct suggested? Could he ... could it ... heal his legs?

He shut his eyes and repeated the song, stroking them. Nothing. Why be greedy? He could see! If only he sat closer to a viewport. The little craft seemed to be leveling out. They were probably headed for another continent.

He was going to meet Agapos. Nee's spiritual leader. Possibly a greater healer.

Something touched his shoulder from behind. He looked up into Nee's delicate turquoise face. Her silvery brow crests and small, round ears glistened. "He touched you," she murmured, her voice a sopranino trill. "*Sifu mungu*."

"Who?" Daye whispered. "Who is it?"

She laughed softly, a trill of shared joy, not derision. She raised her hand from his shoulder and touched his forehead. Suddenly exhausted, he fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

* * *

The shuttle had stopped. Daye's bloody pantlegs had crusted to his joints. Nee stood in front of him, haloed by cabin lights in the cirrifog. A sense of terrible shock slapped him awake. "What's wrong?" he asked.

She swung a long arm. "Come. Aiteff will carry you."

The flat-chested droid rolled into position. Nee scurried to the hatch and vanished through, leaving Daye alone with Aiteff. He pulled up into the droid's metal arms. "What happened?" he asked. "What's wrong?"

"Distress call," Aiteff answered. "Agapos was due to transmit today. Someone else found his transmission site."

Hairs prickled at the base of Daye's neck. "Imperial?"

"We hope not." Aiteff set off. "His escorts were virtually unarmed."

"Why?"

"To avoid detection. He says his defense is the Maker." Agapos ... missing. With a price on his head.

Aiteff wheeled up a long, curving corridor, its ceiling obscured by sparkling haze. Immediately he doglegged into a room jammed with droids, humans, and gangly Sunesis. Console lights flickered, creating half-spheres of shimmering, colored air.

Aiteff rolled to a large viewing well. A humanoid protocol droid stood beside it, close to Toalar and Woyiq. "Aiteff," greeted the droid. "Daye, I am Bee-Kay-Four, Agapos' second in command. Thank you all for the weapons you brought, but we cannot recover them yet. Our search team just reached Agapos' bunker. His aides are rousing from stun. Agapos' blood is everywhere." Outraged, Daye clenched his fists. "We did not track an incoming ship," continued Bee-Kay-Four. "Without Agapos to bless our battles, we cannot survive."

Under other circumstances, Daye might have distrusted an unrestrained droid. This one seemed to have taken charge without anyone objecting.

"There's one outgoing." Toalar pointed vehemently at the viewing well.

A round red bogey streaked outsystem. Four gold darts followed. From the other side of Monor II, eight more ships rose in pursuit. "That must be the bounty killers," agreed Bee-Kay-Four. "We've hailed. They do not respond."

Daye pointed at the darts. "Those are yours?"

"And the others are Brago's." Nee fingered her scorched sleeve. The intensity of her grief made Daye wish Una had not coached him.

The silvery droid swiveled. "Magnify target zone."

Bogey and darts filled the well. Daye no longer needed to squint. The darts were closing.

Bee-Kay-Four's fingers pinged against his sides. "If we don't take them, Brago should."

"Vengeance belongs to the Maker," Nee objected.

The droid answered, "We need not let murderers escape."

"Get 'em," muttered Woyiq.

Daye glared at the bogey. Abruptly he saw its distinct saucer-shape. His throat constricted. "What reading do you get on that ship's shields?"

Another droid touched the well's interface point, then answered, "Marginal. Particle shielding is only 37 percent of standard, and the energy shields have frequency gaps. This will not be difficult." Tinian! But why here?

Because of the death bounty! *Chenlambec was no ordinary bounty hunter*. Una had refused to explain further. The little saucer wasn't even trying to shoot back. "Hold fire!" he cried. "That's a Rebel agent! How many lifeforms on board?"

"I beg your pardon?" Bee-Kay-Four's head swiveled.

"Lifeforms," snapped Daye. "How many? That bounty hunter may have faked Agapos' death, to save him from the Empire!" Blue firing-range wedges appeared in front of the Sunesian darts.

Bee-Kay-Four touched in. "Three lifeforms. What gives you this odd idea?"

Chenlambec ... Tinian ... and another. Una's friend hadn't slaughtered Agapos! "Your leader's on that ship," Daye insisted.

Every Sunesi, every droid, every human in the room froze and stared at him. Their shock pounded him.

"But the Empire posted a death bounty." Bee-Kay-Four swept out silvery arms.

"So they faked his death." Was Toalar picking up his panicky thoughts? *Inadequate shields!*
"Can you risk killing Agapos if he's on board?"

"No!" trilled Nee. "Beekay, change orders!"

Bee-Kay-Four cocked his metal head, maddeningly calm. "If those are Rebel agents, why didn't you tell--"

"I just recognized their specs!"

One blue firing-range wedge nearly brushed the unshielded saucer. "Hold fire," Daye pleaded. "We'll chase them down. Give us a ship."

"That's our entire defense force," Nee trilled.

"Recall one, then," said Daye, "but let us pursue. If those Imperials reach Agapos, he will be slaughtered."

Bee-Kay-Four touched the interface. "Reprogram orders," he intoned. "Disable but do not destroy. Then stand by to escort a weapons retrieval."

One blue wedge flashed red. Daye swallowed panic. Had Bee-Kay-Four changed his orders too late?

The blue wedges winked out. The red saucer continued to flee. Bee-Kay-Four held the interface. "Minor damage," he observed. "They are slowed but not crippled. Aiteff, take these people to my personal shuttle." His head rotated toward Toalar. "I arrived on Monor as booty, stolen from a cruel master. Serving Agapos is freedom enough. You must bring him back."

Daye worried: How badly was Chenlambec's ship damaged? Would they need rescue?

"We'll try," he promised. *Let's go, let's go!*

"But if you are mistaken," continued the droid, "if Agapos is dead, then those bounty hunters must not live to collect their reward. Rebel agents or not."

"We swear," Toalar declared, "but consider this. Agapos might want to stay in hiding."

"Hoil!" Beekay turned aside. "Help them. Report back."

A Sunesi near a door hatch rippled off a salute. His skin was greener than the others', his brow crests wider. "Follow me," he exclaimed.

Finally! Woyiq reached toward Daye, but Aiteff was already swiveling. Grinding his treads, he chased Hoil and Toalar out the dome's outer walkway, then up a spiralling ramp. Woyiq

hustled alongside. The three-finned shuttle on deck had distinctly Imperial lines. "Pretty," Woyiq grumbled. "But is it fast?"

"Our fastest." Aiteff deposited Daye in a second-row seat, then retreated. "Go with the Maker!"

Daye passed a hand over his eyes. There'd been no pain, no gradual improvement. Just instantaneous healing. "We will," he answered. "Thank you." Whatever the Sunesis believed in -- healing, or life after death -- he wanted to know more. If they didn't intercept Agapos, he'd return.

The hatch shut. Woyiq plunked down in back beside Daye. Grasping the controls with clawed hands, Toalar launched.

What if it wasn't Tinian? Daye peered over Hoil's shoulder. The main sensor glowed green. "Radar?" he asked, remembering his guess.

"Beekay refitted this ship." Hoil stroked the console. "Ours have shorter range than most scanners, but we can calibrate jump acceleration."

"What do you mean?" Toalar's monotone throbbed.

Hoil's bony fingers danced on the panel. "We'll read their momentum as they jump. That'll give us a good guess as to its length." Was it Tinian? Daye tried relaxing into the Force. On impulse, he begged, *Please ... whoever you are ... show me if --*

Her presence pierced his mind like a dart. Then the saucer-blip vanished.

The damage wasn't too bad, then. They'd jumped. But it was Tinian, up there! ... and Agapos. Maybe Agapos could heal his legs. But how would Tinian react if she saw him this way?

Daye glanced at the aft screen. Beekay's ship was easily outrunning the Imperial squadron. This must be a Core Worlds shuttle. Who had owned Beekay?

"Clear of the gravity well," Toalar announced. "Are we programmed?"

Hoil jabbed a key. "There."

"Hang on!" Toalar ordered. Stars turned to brilliant threads.

* * *

"Tell me, hired killers: Have you made peace?"

Tinian whirled her flight chair. Agapos stood framed by the aft bulkhead's pitted retractable hatch. Chen had dumped him on a bunk, still stunned, and locked the aft cabin; the

Wroshyr had two tiny cells hunters called "meat lockers," but Chen refused to confine Agapos there.

"What do you mean?" she cried. She couldn't stun him; she'd shelved her blaster. "Flirt, did you let him out?"

"No!" hiccupped Flirt, installed on the main console. "He used sonics!"

Chen's head popped through the deck hatch. He'd patched a deadly pinpoint breach, but now he had to restart life-support. Onboard oxygen would take them only halfway to Tekra Point. Already the air tasted rusty.

"Make peace with the one who made you." Agapos folded his fingers over his silvery tunic. "We will shortly die."

Chen roared. "You're right," Tinian translated hastily. "Agapos, if he doesn't fix the scrubbers we're all dead."

"I disapprove of killing," Agapos assured her. "But I have sworn eternal hostility against every form of tyranny. I will not be used for foul Imperial purposes. I would --"

"Shut up!" she cried. "We're not Imperials! We're trying to save your wretched life."

Agapos glanced toward Chen, then back. "You speak truth," he declared. "I feel it on the Force. But how can this be? At my bunker, you acted savagely."

"We were scared," Tinian snapped. Agapos felt the Force, like Daye? *Oh, Daye ...*

Chen corrected her, then ducked back down.

"I was scared," she admitted. "He was wounded. Chen has an Imperial bounty license, but if the Empire finds out what he does with it, his life will be worth twice yours."

Agapos tilted his bulbous head. "Why is that?"

Tinian explained rapidly. "I see," said the Sunesi when she had finished. "Then I am in your debt. But my followers will grieve deeply."

"They'll avenge your death against the Empire," Tinian pointed out.

"I hope not," said Agapos. "Vengeance belongs to the Maker. Only liberty is worth bloodshed. I am not liberty."

Tinian frowned. Once, she'd believed in a larger cause. She'd been ready to run I'att Armament for the Empire. It was vengeance she served now, not the Rebellion. "But they'll be good and mad," she argued. "They'll fight on without you."

Chen roared a suggestion.

"Right," she said. "They'll be safer without you. Look, we're in trouble... if you don't mind."

The tall alien dropped onto the deck and peered down the hatch. "What is your need?"

Chen spouted technical jargon. Tinian crouched and tried to translate. "You're going to suffocate," piped up Flirt. "That's the long and the short of it. Then what happens to me?"

"We've got less than an hour of air left." Tinian sniffed. *Maybe less.* "We lost a lot."

Agapos raised up on long arms. He looked like a long-legged, tailless turquoise newt. "You have oxywater tanks."

Tinian bristled. How had he known *that*? Inside the largest compartment, Chen's small cloning cylinder wasn't a genuine Spaarti, but the homebrew apparatus gave good, fast-and-dirty results. Chen had squeezed the last drops of Agapos' blood out of his medjector into its production chamber. It would create enough differentiated tissue to convince pay agents that Chenlambec, known in hunt circles as "the Raging Wookiee," had once again brought in all that was left of the corpse.

Maybe Agapos could smell oxywater, the way she smelled explosives. "Yes," she said, "but we need that tissue."

Agapos drew in his long legs and unfolded himself upright. "We need oxygen first. I can cavitate dissolved oxygen from oxywater."

Tinian had supervised cavitation at I'att Armament: high-energy ultrasound could energize dissolved gases out of a liquid. "Chen!" She bent down. "Did you hear that?"

He wurfled and kept working.

An alarm klaxon shrilled. "Twenty seconds!" she cried.

Chen leaped through the hatch, silvertip fur flying. He swung into the pilot's seat as easily as if he were climbing a tree.

"Get secure," Tinian ordered Agapos. "We're about to drop out of hyperspace. Just for a minute. This is an intermediate jump."

"To put off pursuit?" Agapos scrambled aft. He moved well for a mystic.

Tinian left the hatch open. "Exactly. But we can't jump three times. Not if we want to get to Tekra Point breathing." Tekra Point was an aging colony ship, stolen from the Empire and refitted with one Rebel's family treasure. Chen often dropped "acquisitions" here, close to a populated world. So he claimed. She hadn't seen it yet.

Her seat lurched. The starlines shrank to points. Chen bent over the nav computer.

* * *

Toalar strained, listening through his perceptor cones for any faint buzz of the Force. The elegant Imperial shuttle's onboard relays almost deafened him. Hoil gripped the throttles, preparing to drop back into realspace. Agapos' presence had lingered in the Sunesian control room. Here, Toalar hoped he might sense -- Pain! "They're here!" he exclaimed. "Track them again!"

* * *

Most of an hour later, Tinian stood at Agapos' shoulder, Chen beside the pilot's station. They'd all donned oxygen masks and pony bottles. Chen's bottle indicator already glowed red.

It'd been close -- scary close -- when they dropped out of hyperspace to find an Imperial ship right on their tail. Chen had rushed his second jump. They might miss Tekra Point by light-years.

Flirt had isolated the oxywater tanks. Chen had strained tissue into a sample jar, then turned over the tanks to Agapos.

"Protect your ears." Agapos upended a collection bottle and snapped down connectors.

Tinian backed to the opposite bulkhead and smashed both hands against the sides of her head.

Then Agapos screamed. Ultrasonic vibrations echoed off elliptical bulkheads. Her body vibrated. Her cheeks flushed. She felt woozy. Chen keened.

Agapos drew a deep breath. "Are you all right?"

So that was how he'd have killed them. Chen howled. "I'm fine," she retorted. "Are you?"

"Is it working?" chirped Flirt.

Agapos flicked the collection bottle. "From this much oxywater, I can get you there. Yes. Another gift. This one, of appreciation." "If we're on course," Tinian muttered bitterly. "Go ahead."

Agapos opened his mouth as if to address her again, then shook his head and turned away.

Tinian braced herself.

* * *

Chen was easing the *Wroshyr* into a docking cradle when another ship appeared on its sensors. "Him again!" Tinian cried around her oxygen mask.

Chen growl-barked.

"Get ready to run," she warned Agapos. He'd kept her talking while the collection bottles emptied again, shielding her from boredom and fear. He understood sorrow; his bondmate had also died. He'd sympathized with her recurring dream of frantically running, dodging blaster fire, never daring to look back. And he'd left her something to chew on: "Love and loyalty must both be sustained by sacrifice. Until we can learn to return good for evil, there will be no tranquility."

Impractical, but it ennobled her memory of Daye. She would've liked to embrace Agapos, but her hands were full of maneuvering throttles. She was still learning to fly this rustbucket.

"They will refit you?" Agapos asked.

"They're standing by." Chen had explained his need, and the rush. The side hatch clanged. Tinian released the lock. "Good-bye," she called over her shoulder. "Good luck."

"I thank you--"

The hatch popped. Agapos jumped offship. Three humans leaped on. Chen barked.

"Underdeck," Tinian translated. "Hurry."

* * *

Stationers jammed Tekra Point's lounge corridor, some unwashed and unkempt and others in uniform, all trying to get into the lounge. Toalar sighed. "No use," he droned. "We'll have to come back."

"No, we won't," muttered Woyiq. "If I have to hike up a level and rip out the deck, we'll see Agapos."

"Follow me." Hoil plunged into the crowd.

Daye clung to Woyiq's shoulders. His legs dangled over Woyiq's arms. Grumbling stationers backed off when they saw that Hoil was Sunesian. Daye swallowed his pride and hung on.

They reached an open area designed to accommodate 20 or 30. Daye guessed this crowd at 50 or more. On one of several loungers near a bulkhead sat another Sunesi. Through the Force, Daye felt his presence like a damped energy furnace.

Agapos spotted Hoil. "Friend," he trilled, and then, "Let these people through."

Hoil stalked across a sea of cross-legged stationers. Behind Woyiq, Toalar was probably coming.

Daye saw only Agapos. The priest-prince's presence prickled like bacta. Agapos' long, silvery-gray, sleeved tunic draped in long folds over the faded brown lounge. His brow crests stood out strongly, more like Hoil's than Nee's. "Who are these people?" he asked.

Hoil touched one knee to the deck. "Rebels and friends," he answered. "Beekay's ships would have destroyed you."

"Understandable mistake." Agapos extended his palms. "The Tekrans supplied my ... abductors with replacement parts. They remained docked for less than a minute."

"I know," murmured Daye. He'd been relieved and heartsick, a crazy-making pair of emotions.

"You were the ones who followed us?" Agapos asked.

"Yes. This one --" Hoil pointed up at Daye. "-- realized you were shipboard. He seems to know the hunters who abducted you."

Agapos eyed Daye. "Your name, brother-son? No, wait. You are uncomfortable." He flicked his tunic folds closer and beckoned to Woyiq. "Seat him beside me."

Woyiq let Daye slip out of his arms. Daye could scarcely believe this was happening. He had met Agapos. He was sitting beside Agapos.

"Now," said the priest-prince. "Your name?"

"Daye Azur-Jamin."

Agapos stared. Tinian had undoubtedly told the priest-prince he was dead. What else had she said?

Agapos rocked onto his feet and raised his arms. "Friends and brothers," he called, "thanks for your welcome. I must speak with these persons. May we continue our fellowship later?"

The crowd dispersed quietly, as if Agapos inspired politeness. The seedy lounge emptied except for Agapos, Hoil -- seated at the priest-prince's left hand -- Woyiq, cross-legged at his feet, and Toalar ... who stood several paces away, pressing one hand to his head as if it ached miserably.

Agapos laid a hand on Daye's shoulder. "She is sick with grief," he murmured. "Why have you deceived her?"

Guilt jabbed Daye. "So I could give myself to the Rebellion. It was better, sir -- to let her think I had died -- than to let her see me like this." He splayed both hands on his legs.

"You too are grieving, for the loss of your old life. She would care for you as you are."

"Yes," Daye began, "but--"

"You made a great sacrifice, brother-son. But you are too proud of it."

Daye blinked. Proud? "The Imperials did kill her grandparents."

"Yes. Poor child. And what of her parents?"

"She never knew them." From a fellow employee, Daye had learned only that Tinian's mother abandoned her before vanishing. "You say she is ill?"

"She is trying to kill her capacity to love. She may succeed." Daye stared at his hands. It might've been better to have died than to hear this. "It is not all your doing," said Agapos. "She chooses this. Chenlambec tries to dissuade her."

Daye had tried to imagine that unconventional bounty hunter. "What is he like?"

"Courageous. Intelligent. She does not realize how deeply he cares for her."

Daye covered his eyes. He ached all over, especially his heart.

"How were you were injured?" Agapos asked quietly.

Telling his story gave Daye no pleasure.

"You made certain you would harm no one else," Agapos observed.

Daye nodded, warmed against his will by Agapos' presence. "I tried. I didn't try to save myself."

"Are you still in pain?"

"Always," he admitted. His legs were nerve-blocked, but the shoulder throbbed almost constantly.

"Pain is easy to control with the Force. You are already doing it ... somewhat."

Daye laid his hand over Agapos. "I believe you can help me. Your disciple, Nee, showed me how to heal my sight."

Agapos turned to the others. "Excuse us for a moment. You, particularly," he addressed Toalar. "We have not spoken, but I know you helped move events. Thank you."

"Pleasure is mine," grunted Toalar.

"I will not be offended if you leave," Agapos assured him. "We will speak over the comlink. I hold you in highest regard, but my presence pains Gotals."

Toalar's red eyes brightened. "Thank you," he exclaimed. He galloped out.

"Now." Agapos turned back to Daye. "You can do much yourself, using the Force. Try..."

Ten minutes later, Daye sat straighter. As Agapos claimed, pain control was not difficult. He'd needed only to be taught.

"Join the Sunesi way," Agapos said gently. "You could eventually heal yourself."

"Eventually?" Daye's spirit sank again.

"Your eyes were healed by the Maker," insisted Agapos. "To show you it could be done. *Sifumungu*," he sang, smiling.

It had to be true. He'd expended no effort. "Yes," said Daye.

"Your spirit needs healing, too. There is much good in you, but your pride and your pain make you a lesser man. Give your life to service, and you will save it."

Daye hesitated. Was this destiny, or a heartwarming temptation? "I would be pleased to teach you. The greatest gift is serving individuals, not --" He opened his hands to the empty room. "-- transmitting to the teeming galaxy."

"Tinian and Chenlambec save one life at a time," Daye agreed. "Agapos, please stay in hiding. For the sake of your safety ... and theirs. Chenlambec and Tinian risk their lives to save others." He should have known she wouldn't make a judgment error!

"My people will grieve," Agapos objected.

"Send Hoil back." Daye glanced past Agapos at the other Sunesi. "He can relay the secret."

"Deception is never wise," Agapos answered. "I myself might have killed your dearest friends."

Hoil raised a hand. "Master, the stationers have kept this place secret."

"True."

"When we must protect information from Imperial intelligence, it can be done."

The priest-prince folded his hands. "Very well. I shall remain in hiding. I shall take another name. But I shall double my writing speed."

"Wonderful," murmured Hoil.

"I will have nothing to distract me. I will have no followers to nurture. Unless this brother-son will help me?" He raised a brow crest at Daye.

Agapos would need a new identity, and a technologically knowledgeable aide to help transmit his essays. Daye wanted to agree; he felt deeply honored; but how much of this longing was a selfish desire to be whole, one day ... and reveal himself, healed, to Tinian?

"Good," said Agapos softly. "That sense is humility. The Tekrans tell me they maintain a safeworld. There we could disseminate my writings. And I hear they build arms for the Rebellion." Agapos crinkled his silvery lips. "I'm told you were a skilled researcher."

Tinian had smuggled two of his c-boards off Druckenwell, hoping someone might redevelop I'att Armament's anti-energy field. Some day. She'd left them with Una Poot ... and Toalar would shortly report back. Suddenly he saw his future. "Take me as your aide, then," he said, "or your acolyte."

Agapos inclined his head. "In time, perhaps, my disciple. But count the cost. Some day, I will ask a difficult penance."

Daye raised an eyebrow.

"We must seek out your Tinian, brother-son."

* * *

Chen scrambled up the deck hatch.

"All patched in?" Tinian still quivered, but Agapos' screams hadn't injured her permanently. Already the *Wroshyr* -- the Wrusty, it ought to be called -- smelled better. Chen tossed his head and howled.

"Good as new," echoed Flirt. Tinian had polished her until she shone ... and made a new friend. "Better, in some places. Did you see that second mechanic? What a hunk --"

Tinian had no patience with hunks. "Fine," she interrupted. "Next stop, Ookbat. Payday. Is this the best bounty you ever took?" Chen tucked his dark chin to his silvery chest and chuckled. "Right," she sighed. He was infuriatingly generous. "Most of it goes to Una Poot. But may I make a request?"

Chen woofed and laid his hand on her arm.

"No, *Ng'rhr*." Fondly, she tugged his soft fur. "Not that. I don't need pretty things. But the *Wroshyr* could use better shielding." Howled laughter rattled its pitted bulkheads.

"That's funny?" Flirt squeaked. "Boss, you owe her an I'att blaster at least! She saved your life again. Remember Agapos' transmitter room."

Tinian glared. "Flirt! Never say that to a Wookiee!" Chen crooned a soft reproach.

"Well." Tinian shrugged. "Okay. If it makes you want to upgrade!"

36:3:22/IHV/G76D/COR.1.IPC/POL

Imperial Advisor Calls Dentaal Plague Rebel Plot

Imperial City, Coruscant

The terrifying outbreak of the Candorian plague which wiped out the entire population of Dentaal was due to the efforts of the Rebel terrorist organization, announced Alec Pradeux, one of Emperor Palpatine's close advisors.

"I have, at the Emperor's direction, been engaged for the past few weeks in a close investigation of the Dentaal disaster," Pradeux said today in a Palace press conference. "It is now clear that the virus, long thought extinct, was reconstructed by Alderaan's biowar research labs. Our august Emperor moved with haste to remove the threat of Organa's death labs as soon as he learned of his abominable experiments, but alas, not quickly enough to prevent an unknown number of canisters of product from being transported off planet by the Rebels."

According to Pradeux, it now appears that the release of the virus on Dentaal by the Rebels was accidental, and occurred as they loaded transport canisters onto a ship bound for Coruscant. "We can only be thankful that the vermin choked on their own filth before they were able to unleash it upon millions of innocent Imperial citizens," said Pradeux. "Naturally, we at the Palace mourn the passing of Dentaal."

The information from Pradeux's fact-finding mission remains classified, but the Imperial Advisor seemed confident that it will be released to the public in the near future. He stressed that the danger has not yet passed. "We must not relax our guard for even a moment. As long as the Rebellion festers unchecked, there exists also the possibility that other canisters, secreted in other sites, await their chance to inflict unimaginable devastation to our worlds."

Imperial HoloVision

36:4:4/DSN/T11R/ESS.3.ALA/MIL

New Probot Contracts Awarded

Alabar, Esseles

In a move that will provide new jobs and revenue for Esseles, the Imperial Navy has awarded contracts for an additional 60,000,000 probe droids from the military contractors involved in the Imperial probot program, on top of the 150,000,000 already manufactured in the past two years.

Dynacorp and Sendarl Electronics, two Esseles-based primary contractors for the probot program, are providing the hull pod and the sensory array designs, respectively.

Darpa SectorNet

Age of Rebellion: Friends Like These

The hardest part was not staring at the mustache. Captain Ralchio Nervi had overdone it with the wax today. It looked like someone had tried to bridle a dewback and missed.

"Are you listening, Lieutenant?" The captain's brow furrowed in disappointment. Adrenaline surged through the lieutenant's body. It wasn't like her to be this unfocused. It had taken months to get invited to strategy sessions in his stateroom. She had to stay sharp.

"Oh!" She looked at the floor as her cheeks flushed. "I'm so sorry, Captain. When you talk about your future, it makes me wonder about mine."

Nervi traced a finger along his dark mustache from his nose to his ear, arching an eyebrow in a way he probably thought looked commanding.

"Well, then you'll want to pay attention," he smirked. "I have good news."

"My own command?" She raised her head and offered her most wide-eyed and trusting expression.

"Well, no." The corners of his mouth drooped. "But soon, I promise." Nervi walked back toward his desk. "No, I have other news, news worth celebrating." He produced two glasses, and a criminally expensive vintage of Alderaanian wine. She started to worry.

"Are we being deployed, Captain?"

"Yes, and I'm being promoted." He sat down, grinning.

"Congratulations!" He was lying, but what was his game this time? "But I thought you said Grand Moff Ravik would never recommend you. How did you change his mind?"

"Oh, Ravik won't have a say when I deliver the Emperor the Rebel Fleet on an aurodium platter." That ridiculous mustache writhed like a snake.

"Captain." She had no words, but she needed to keep him talking. She looked down into her drink. "You shouldn't be telling me this."

"That's how I know I can trust you, Alico."

"Are you sure?"

Nervi blinked.

"About the Fleet, I mean."

"Quite." He produced a holo of a dull-orange planet. "I give you the Ferra Sector Shipyard." He paused. "Well, it's more of a repair slip, really." He manipulated the holo to zoom in on the yard.

"Are you sure it's the Rebels? It's so small."

"The real facility is the surface of the planet itself. They've at the very least aided and abetted. We'll be perfectly safe; they don't have much in the way of defenses."

She examined the image of the shipyard. It was outfitting a Corellian bulk freighter, clearly adding turbolasers. This was a disaster. She took another drink to stall.

"What did Ravik say?"

"Oh, I don't plan to tell him. He'd never send me; one of his flunkies would go, and Ravik would take all the credit." That was it: Nervi was making a play to oust the Grand Moff. She needed to know more.

"But Captain!" Lieutenant Alico stood.

Nervi snorted. "Ravik's people are just as likely to screw this all up and blame it on me," he smirked, stroking his mustache. "No, we can't trust them: you know that. The *Blood Ambition* will be hyperspace ready within two days. The *Sargantuan* and the *Warhawk* just finished shakedown cruises. I've already filled out the datawork to make it look like a training exercise."

"You mean to take the yard without reporting it in."

"That's right. I've been waiting a long time for this." Nervi began staring out the viewport, and Alico sat back down.

"We'll take Xorrn, and after we've interrogated and executed every Rebel sympathizer on that rock, we'll lay a trap for their Rebel friends. Once their first cruiser shows up for repairs..." Nervi looked back at her, and she wanted to slap the pretentious smirk off his face. "We'll have the location of the Rebel Fleet on its navicomputers." Alico's back stiffened. Whoever brought the Emperor the location of the Rebel Fleet could have his pick of Imperial sectors to govern. Nervi wasn't going to oust Ravik: he was going to leap over him on the backs of the Rebel Alliance.

"My triumph is at hand, Lieutenant; I've seen it in my dreams. The galaxy is mine." The captain turned back toward the viewport. In a few minutes, he'd be planning his acceptance speech at his Grand Moff elevation ceremony. She took another drink and sighed. It was going to be a long evening.

Stepping from her quarters aboard the *Blood Ambition*, Lieutenant Nath Alico made her way to the officer's mess to eat breakfast and then stopped at three refreshers to make sure she wasn't being followed. She took a turbolift down to the main hangar, and walked into a droid storage hold. A dented black and grey astromech warbled angrily.

"Well, then I guess you would have had to wait another shift." Alico leaned down and inserted a dataspikes into the droid's reader. "Put this out top priority."

The droid whistled cautiously.

"Yes, I'm sure. It's worth the risk." She straightened her hair. "Start recording." She took a deep breath. "This is Agent Alico, Operation Ruby Audit, authentication code 11RFK1651. Xorrn is made; my full report is attached. You have three days. Good luck."

Edge of Empire: Beyond the Rim

BEYOND THE RIM

Amid a backdrop of galactic civil war, a huge space station known as the WHEEL is one of the few places still beyond the Emperor's reach, attracting low-lives, fortune-seekers, and refugees alike.

Meanwhile, a derelict message pod discovered by an illicit tech company on the Wheel gives new life to old smugglers' stories about a long-lost Separatist treasury ship, the SA NALAOR. The wreck lies at the edge of WILD SPACE, waiting to be found by those brave or crazy enough to look....

GRINNER'S TALES OF TREASURE HUNTING

The *Sa Nalaor*? Well, now that's going back a bit. There was a time when every treasure hunter in the Outer Rim was out there looking for that long-lost Separatist flying vault. While the truth and the *Sa Nalaor* rarely seem to go together, one thing's for sure: the *Sa Nalaor*'s infamous for disappearing.

Here's one version of the story, and it might even be true: at the end of the Clone Wars, a Separatist captain loaded up his ship with every credit and ingot he could fit. When the Separatist movement collapsed, off he went. He made a mad dash up the Perlemian Trade Route and took along the best cybertechs in the galaxy.

Well, the new Imperials wouldn't have any of that. Maybe they feared a new cyber war or Outer Rim warlord, but it's more likely they thought they were just hunting down yet another fleeing Separatist commander. In any case, the Imperials chased them up the Perlemian Trade Route.

The *Sa Nalaor* must have had a jittery hyperdrive, because we've got tales of skirmishes all the way to the Outer Rim. Right when the Imperials were about to blow the ship to pieces—*bam!* The ship disappeared in one last hyperspace jump. That was it. No one's seen it since.

Some say the ship simply disappeared in a hyperspace mishap. Others report sightings out in deep space, believing the ship might be lost between the stars. Every so often, someone reports debris on a remote Outer Rim planet. Problem is, there were so many Separatist ships fighting during the war—and scattering afterwards—that there's a lot of lost ships to find. So, you might find something if you want to look hard enough. Just not the *Sa Nalaor*. At least, not yet.

GRINNER'S WHEEL AND DEALINGS

The Wheel is a fantastic, civilized place to get away from it all—especially the Empire. I don't know what sort of deal they've managed to pull, but whatever it is, it keeps the Imperials away. Well, mostly. I'm sure the Imperials keep tabs on the place, and I've heard they got their own station or ships nearby, just to track the comings and goings of whoever wants to avoid Imperial eyes. No matter. There's enough traffic that one more freighter will hardly be noticed, or seen as out of the ordinary.

Go. Have fun, but not too much. Local security is tough. They don't care who you are. If you make trouble, you're off the station faster than you can say "Jabba the Hutt sent me." Probably won't care anyway. You want a name they will care about? Sure, I got one, but it'll cost you extra.

GRINNER ON THE FRINGES OF SPACE

Sure, there are still frontiers in the galaxy. They're out there where Known Space runs out and the unsettled and uncivilized fringe of Wild Space begins. This is the realm of the brave, the opportunistic, the foolish, and the desperate. There's no telling what you'll find on a world ignored by or left off of most official star charts. Don't forget, a planet is still a big place. Even a large city can be overlooked by an incoming ship if it's not doing a proper survey. A lot of those fringe worlds have uncharted settlements, illegal operations, and unofficial colonies. They're often barely civilized places, forgotten by the galaxy, and they like it that way. Of course, your first problem might be the unfriendly, violent, and aggressive wildlife that wants to have you for lunch. If you're real unlucky, it might try to save half of you for dinner. Watch yourself out there, and carry a big blaster.

GRINNER'S PRIME REAL ESTATE

Raxus Prime? The junkiest junk planet in the galaxy? Ha! What do you want to be, smugglers or trash haulers? I can get you a garbage scow, cheap, no problem. Okay...really, I can give you 100 better planets to visit, and half of them Imperial. No?

Anyway, if you go there, avoid the Imperial patrols—they don't like salvagers taking what's theirs, even if it is just garbage. Drop low in the atmosphere and use the junk piles and gas clouds to obscure your flight path from the scout ships and probe droids. You need to hide? Cut all power and hide in with the junk. I've seen your ship. It'll fit right in.

41-VEX'S STORY

The droid 41-VEX's programming contains a self-improvement directive, as is only appropriate for a doctor. Just as organic doctors are commonly committed to continuing education to keep their skills sharp and to develop new techniques, so too is 41-VEX dedicated to increasing its skills and mastery of medicine. Unfortunately for 41-VEX, the droid was until recently stationed at a clinic in Mos Eisley, on the desert planet of Tatooine, with very few opportunities to improve its skills. 41-VEX spent decades rusting away, patching up blaster burns and broken appendages suffered during brawls and speeder crashes. The droid despaired of ever being able to either access the latest surgery protocols or expand its knowledge through its learning algorithms.

Over the decades, with no memory wipe, 41-VEX developed several quirks in its programming, and concluded that the only way to improve its skills as a surgeon and doctor was to purchase its own freedom. To do this, 41-VEX took out a loan from a local moneylender in service to Teemo the Hutt.

Unfortunately for 41-VEX, Teemo's promises that the droid would be free to improve its core programming weren't entirely honest. Teemo even offered to make several hardware and software upgrades available to the droid at the Hutt's palace in Mos Shuuta. When 41-VEX arrived, it was promptly fitted with a restraining bolt and forced to provide medical care to Teemo's guards and gladiators. Some of the promised upgrades did manifest themselves, however, as Teemo updated 41-VEX with some maintenance and repair programs.

Fortunately for 41-VEX, the droid has struck up dealings with both Teemo's favorite gladiator, a Wookiee named Lowhrick, and a hotshot young human pilot named Pash. They are the closest thing 41-VEX has to "friends" on Tatooine. Lowhrick, of course, is a frequent patient, and 41-VEX has been called upon several times to repair Pash's ship, which gets damaged far more often than one might expect. Recently, 41-VEX aided Lowhrick's attempts to escape Teemo by introducing him to Pash. The Wookiee promptly removed 41-VEX's restraining bolt and brought the droid along.

ARKHAN'S STORY

When Supreme Chancellor Palpatine became Emperor Palpatine at the close of the Clone Wars, it was already obvious to some sentients that a new war was on the horizon. Arkhan Brem'tu, then a young lieutenant in the Bothawui Defense Corps, was one of these individuals. Initially supportive of the Chancellor, Arkhan enlisted in the BDC during the early days of the Clone Wars and was deployed in a number of peacekeeping and counter-intelligence operations on Bothawui. As he observed the increasingly draconian tactics used by the Republic forces throughout the conflict, he became increasingly concerned. When Order 66 was initiated and the Jedi Order was exterminated, including a handful of personal friends Arkhan had made over the course of the war, he saw that a renewed war was inevitable.

Arkhan immediately began seeking out like-minded sentients on Bothawui and beyond. Over the next 20 years, he laid the groundwork for a dozen Rebellion cells and had a minor but laudable role in the creation of the Alliance to Restore the Republic.

Over the years, Arkhan has been living a dangerous life. Although broadly sympathetic to the Rebellion, the political establishment of Bothawui has been heavily invested in remaining neutral in the civil war; it would not have supported or defended Arkhan in the slightest if he had been exposed to the Empire. In fact, if they had felt that Arkhan were likely to be uncovered, they might have eliminated him themselves to spare Bothawui the embarrassment. And the agents of the Empire, of course, were everywhere. To be able to evade his enemies and make contact with potential Rebellion recruits, Arkhan was forced to be slow to trust and hard to rattle.

In recent years, the Rebellion has finally come out of the shadows and Arkhan's lonely, secret war is over. No more secrets and lies and uncertainty. Now Arkhan is assigned to Alliance Special Operations, an organization he helped create, and assuming field command of Special Operations groups to finally strike back against the so-called Empire.

BELANDI'S STORY

Belandi Fearr was a member of a Mirialan religious order on a Mirialan colony world in the Outer Rim, dwelling in a temple complex that dominated her home city and serving as a healer in the community. Belandi was a member of a movement within her order that called itself the Pacifists, preaching peace and mercy above all other virtues (as opposed to the Benedictors, the Revelers, and the Contemplators, among others, who each held their own interpretations of the Creed).

When the Empire claimed control of her home planet, Belandi joined the rest of the Pacifists in counseling non-interference with the political ebb and flow of the galaxy. The Benedictors objected, staged a protest of the new Imperial governor, and were exterminated by stormtroopers. It was the beginning of a long period of oppression and division among the followers of the Creed, some of whom continued to preach political non-involvement and others who objected to the Empire's policy. Those who objected vanished one by one. Some were publicly arrested or killed. Others simply disappeared, with no explanation.

After almost two years of Imperial rule, Belandi was called upon to heal the chief of the local security forces: the governor's enforcer, the one responsible for the death or disappearance of many of Belandi's colleagues and friends. The woman was dying of an infected wound, a stubborn ailment easily mended by Belandi's arts but resistant to more traditional therapies. Belandi could have easily saved the woman's life. Instead, she let her die.

Wanted for murder on her home world and racked with guilt over her decision, Belandi was smuggled off the planet by Hethan Romund, an old friend of her order who had several times visited her temple's libraries. Belandi became a recluse, meditating on the past and vowing to never again give in to fear, hatred, or revenge.

Now, Romund herself is in trouble, and it is time for Belandi to leave her isolation and repay the favor...

CAEL'S STORY

Cael of House Hanarist had it all. He was born into one of Alderaan's noble Houses and could have lived a life of easy leisure. In a sense he did, if one defines leisure as becoming one of Alderaan's foremost athletes and one of the fastest limmie players to ever move a ball across the field. Cael had fame, fortune, a charming fiancée from another noble House, and a lovely home in Crevasse City. Though the direction of the galaxy under the Empire disturbed Cael, he stood firmly behind the ideals of pacifism, believing that moderating change would come from individuals working to improve the system from within. After all, he thought, using violence against the Empire would only affirm the might-makes-right logic that brought it to power in the first place.

Then Alderaan was destroyed by the Death Star and Cael's world was gone. Cael happened to be offworld at the time, playing with Team Alderaan in the Galactic Cup on Fondor. When news reached the limmie players, they were devastated. The Galactic Cup was placed on hiatus, and Team Alderaan evaporated, each member racing off across the galaxy to chase some rumor or hope of finding far-flung family members and other survivors.

Cael used the last of his family's money to charter a ship and flew back to Alderaan itself. Staring into the asteroid-strewn void that used to be his home, something inside Cael broke. All his life, he had committed himself to peace and non-violence, as was traditional among Alderaanians. He'd used his celebrity status for the cause: he'd been part of peaceful protests on Alderaan and Corellia, raised funds for war orphans, and lobbied in the Senate for the dissolution of the Imperial war machine. All of it had come to nothing.

Confronted by the ashes of his world, Cael renounced his pacifism. Non-violence had achieved nothing but the destruction of Alderaan, and the Empire wouldn't be toppled by anything less than all-out military rebellion. Cael took his chartered vessel to Chandrila and quickly found members of the Rebel Alliance eager to recruit the young athlete. In a matter of weeks, Cael went from limmie star to soldier, and he has never looked back.

DAO'S STORY

Dao Jodh and his people lived in peace and contemplation on a world they called simply "Home," and the rest of the galaxy referred to as Jiran VII. Many generations ago, Dao's ancestors turned their back on the rest of the galaxy and focused their gaze inward, toward inner peace and contemplation.

Dao found the regimented and contemplative life expected of him boring. His mentors told him that he was gifted, that he had more potential for enlightenment than any before him. They encouraged him to focus on his studies and unlock the mysteries within him. Nothing could be more tedious, but knowing no other life, Dao did his best.

One day, Dao's monastery was visited by strange people—offworlders! Suddenly, a whole galaxy of possibility, of diversity and difference and experience, seemed available to Dao. He plagued the visiting scholar, Hethan Romund, with questions, and she indulged his curiosity with as many answers as she could manage. She spoke of the great cities of the Core Worlds, of the fallen Jedi Order, of the crystal canyons of Chandrila and the oceans of Dac, a thousand thousand things Dao had never dreamed of seeing.

Dao became convinced that the outsiders' arrival was no accident—that they were calling him to his destiny. He asked the elders of his monastery for permission to leave. They denied him, and told him that his destiny was to be the Savior of his people. They insisted that he should put such notions out of his head, for the ordeals ahead of him would be great. Dao snuck out that night and, in the morning, followed the offworlders to their ship, stowing away aboard it.

Since then, Dao and the Togruta Kaveri have traveled the galaxy together. Dao is always eager to find new worlds and people and see the stunning diversity the galaxy has to offer, while remaining true to the peaceful wisdom of his upbringing.

If he sometimes feels guilty for abandoning his people, he doesn't mention it. But when a message came in from Romund requesting help, he was very swift to respond. Perhaps soon he will be ready to return to Home. But not yet.

JIN-RIO'S STORY

The planet Colstev, Jin-Rio's home, is a smallish, rocky world in the Stewjon system. Most of the population lives in domed cities built into the craters that dot the planet's surface. Colstev's cities are large, cosmopolitan, and hotbeds of intellectualism, political rhetoric, and, according to people from the rest of Stewjon system, bossiness.

Jin-Rio was born and raised on Colstev and attended the University of Zo-Ro where she studied Political Science and immediately became heavily involved in local politics. Like many idealistic young university students, Jin-Rio marched on the capital of Colstev, read proclamations condemning Imperial cronyism and human-centric policies, and generally made a nuisance of herself at every opportunity. Due to Colstev's long tradition of free speech and vitriolic political rhetoric, Jin-Rio and her comrades were caught completely by surprise when one of their peaceful demonstrations was interrupted by Imperial stormtroopers and AT-ATs. Hundreds of students died and the University of Zo-Ro was closed.

The Massacre of Zo-Ro, as it came to be known, was the watershed moment for Jin-Rio. She went into hiding as the ISB crawled through the city, rounding up any suspected dissidents and, on occasion, their families. Jin-Rio watched as most of her friends (those who had survived the massacre, at least) disappeared one by one. Seeing no other options, Jin-Rio fled the planet and joined the Rebel Alliance, vowing to return one day and restore democratic principles to her homeworld.

Now, Jin-Rio serves attached to Special Operations, where she lends her expertise as a Political Advisor to high-ranking officers such as Arkhan Brem'tu. She also engages in field missions to destabilize Imperial control and apply political leverage to recalcitrant civilian governments.

KAVERI'S STORY

Kaveri Ra was separated from her family at a young age. Having lived a nomadic lifestyle until that time, moving constantly from planet to planet, she continued in that vein after her parents vanished.

She had been serving as a wilderness guide and hunter throughout the Outer Rim for most of her life, when she met Hethan Romund on an expedition to a ruin on an otherwise deserted world. Over the course of that expedition, Romund was curious about Kaveri's uncanny knack for spotting trouble before it happened and understanding the local wildlife, even though she'd never visited the planet before.

Ultimately, Romund revealed the truth: Kaveri was sensitive to the Force, and her unusual abilities were only the least of what she could accomplish. Romund insisted that she was capable of much more—but that Romund herself could not teach her.

When the expedition reached the ruin, they were surprised to discover that it was not ruined in the slightest, but was in fact a fully functioning (but quite remote) monastery inhabited by a peaceful group of Zabraks who had completely forsaken technology and the outside world. After a few weeks spent learning from the Zabraks and exploring their ancient monastery, Romund and Kaveri left and went their separate ways. It was only after dropping Romund off on her home planet that Kaveri discovered a stowaway on her ship: a young Zabrak from the monastery named Dao. Far from being upset that Dao had smuggled himself aboard, Kaveri was delighted to have a new traveling companion, especially one who seemed to have some knowledge of this so-called "Force."

Since that day, Kaveri and Dao have traveled the galaxy together, exploring strange worlds and the mysteries of the Force. Recently, a message reached Kaveri from her old friend Romund, calling her to the Outer Rim world of Spintir...

LOWHHRICK'S STORY

The Wookiees of the heavily forested planet Kashyyyk are a proud species with a rich culture and sophisticated technology. Unfortunately, their bestial appearance and inability to speak Basic often leads to the misconception that all Wookiees are little more than savage brutes. A long-standing antagonism between the Wookiees of Kashyyyk and the lizard-like Trandoshans frequently flares up as Trandoshans hunt Wookiees for sport. Lowhhrick's sister and nephew were victims of one of these Trandoshan raiding parties, and both were killed. Lowhhrick vowed to hunt down the Trandoshans responsible... and was promptly captured. So began his long career as a gladiator, forced to do battle for the amusement of others.

Lowhhrick eventually achieved such fame that his contract was acquired by a Hutt gangster named Teemo and he was brought to Tatooine. Teemo would periodically send Lowhhrick into the ring to vanquish gladiators belonging to his business "partners" as a means of establishing his dominance. From time to time Lowhhrick was asked to serve as bodyguard during particularly important "business meetings," where his presence would serve as a reminder that Teemo had many trained killers on his payroll.

Recently, Lowhhrick struck up a friendship with a bounty hunter named Oskara who also worked for Teemo the Hutt. Oskara was planning to make a run for it and quit Teemo's service, and Lowhhrick offered his help...if Oskara would take him with her. Lowhhrick also grabbed 41-VEX, the droid medic who patched him up after each fight, and brought the droid along.

Lowhhrick has a great deal of experience with combat, both from his career as a gladiator and his time acting as a warrior on Kashyyyk. He is disciplined and thoughtful by nature, but his experiences of the past few decades have made him somewhat short-tempered. He takes his obligations and his oaths very seriously, and nothing is more important to him than escaping his predicament and getting vengeance for his family. Although Lowhhrick cannot speak Basic, he understands it quite well and the other PCs understand his language just as well.

MATHUS' STORY

In a different life, Mathus would have been a successful research engineer at a major corporation headquartered in the Core Worlds. In this life, Mathus grew up hard on the streets of Anchorhead on Tatooine. Orphaned at a young age, Mathus was burdened with a powerful intellect and no useful way to apply it. He slid into a life of thuggery and crime, until one fateful day when he attempted to rob a shop belonging to an old Rodian mechanic named Honwoo. Honwoo made no particular attempt to resist, but seeing young Mathus's fascination with a partially-stripped machine on his workbench, offered to teach the young human how it worked. Six hours later, Mathus's friends came by to see what had gone wrong and found him covered in machine oil, helping to repair a repulsorlift array.

Over the next few years, Honwoo taught Mathus the ins and outs of every machine that came through his repair shop. With no formal education, Mathus developed an unorthodox but effective approach that relied heavily on trial and error. He also found that he enjoyed tinkering and repurposing existing machines, turning them to a new purpose. For example, his customized shock gloves began life as power converters.

Most of Honwoo's business had to do with the repair, maintenance, and reprogramming of Tatooine's limited supply of droids. As a consequence, Mathus became a droid expert. His skills eventually came to the attention of a Hutt named Teemo, and Mathus was offered an impressive sum of credits to make his skills available at Teemo's Mos Shuuta complex. Since his arrival in Mos Shuuta, Mathus has regretted his decision. The project Teemo has him working on is completely unsuited to his skills: Mathus' experience gives him the skills necessary to repair busted old battle droids, but he completely lacks the education to develop a schematic based on their design. And when Mathus attempted to leave, Teemo hinted that something bad might happen to Honwoo if he did...

Fed up and backed into a corner, Mathus has decided to make a break for it. First, he introduced some new code into one of Teemo's droids, 41-VEX, to encourage the droid to try to escape, too. Then, he struck up a friendship with a scout named Sasha, intending to pool their resources and get off Tatooine...

OSKARA'S STORY

Ryloth, the home planet of the Twi'leks, is a dry, dusty planet with precious little to offer for anyone looking to get rich. In fact, its most valuable (some would say only valuable) export is the illegal spice called Ryll. Consequently, many of the rich and powerful on Ryloth are smugglers, crime lords, and thugs, sometimes capturing innocent Twi'leks and forcing them to labor in the spice mines.

Oskara was always quick, clever, and lucky enough to stay ahead of the press gangs...but her sister Makara was not. When Makara was nabbed by Aqualish thugs, Oskara had to act fast to keep her sister out of the mines. She offered her own unique services to the gang leader instead, claiming to be an experienced bounty hunter. Surprisingly, her first job for the gang went well and Oskara soon thrived under the tutelage of a veteran hunter named Gyax. She was called on to perform more and more duties for the spice mining gang, and as long as she did well Makara was safe.

But then Oskara was "loaned out" to a Hutt gangster on Tatooine named Teemo. And then things started to come undone. Teemo paid her quite well, but in the course of her bounty-hunting work for the Hutt she uncovered a plot against the Ryll-mining gang on Ryloth. The Hutt was going to seize their territory...and there would be no more guarantees of safety for Makara. Oskara decided to team up with Teemo's favorite gladiator, a Wookiee named Lowhhrick, and one of his best pilots, a human named Pash. Alongside her new companions, Oskara has sent a warning to her compatriots on Ryloth and is now fleeing Teemo's revenge.

Oskara seems jaded and cynical at first, having seen much of the worst the galaxy had to offer at a young age. She is careful not to get too attached to anyone or anything. She is a professional bounty hunter and takes a serious approach to her work, focusing on results rather than any emotional considerations.

PASH'S STORY

It's been a hard run for the smuggler, con-man, and rogue known only as Pash. First he was ejected from Imperial flight school for "insubordination" (which is apparently a fancy word for "stealing a shuttle for a quick flight around the planet when bored one day"). Then his favorite speeder-bike was impounded when he fell behind on his debt payments. Then Pash was arrested for grifting on the streets of Aldera, on the planet Alderaan. Then he was transported for hard labor in the spice mines of Kessel, which was apparently some Alderaani noble's way of getting back at Pash for something involving the noble's daughter. Then the transport carrying him to Kessel was attacked by pirates and Pash was press-ganged into service. Then the pirates were defeated by an Imperial frigate and Pash was arrested for piracy. Then Alderaan was blown up by the super battlestation called the Death Star and things got really tense. Then Pash was set free by an Imperial officer named Herkin, who explained that Pash now owed him a huge favor, and by the way Pash was now going to fly starships for a gentlebeing named Teemo the Hutt.

Recently, Pash has been flying cargos for Teemo in and out of the tiny town of Mos Shuuta on Tatooine. In some ways it's been the most boring and peaceful eight weeks of Pash's life. In other ways, he keeps getting shot at by pirates and customs officials and having to do risky landings in remote, dangerous places, so it's terrifying at the same time. On his most recent mission, Pash's ship, a rusty old Ghtroc 720 light freighter named *Ao Var*, was damaged beyond repair and had to be sold off for parts when he finally returned to Mos Shuuta. Teemo the Hutt was not happy, since the *Ao Var* was technically the Hutt's property. Pash decided it was probably time to leave the Hutt's service, and teamed up with his favorite droid mechanic 41-VEX and a lethal Twi'lek bounty hunter named Oskara to make it happen.

Despite his long life of misfortune, Pash thinks of himself as lucky - and perhaps he is. After all, if he hadn't been arrested and transported off of Alderaan, he might have been there when the Empire blew it up. Pash has a knack for coming through disaster unscathed. He's a really excellent pilot and pretty good at a lot of other things, and has the easy-going nature of one to whom things come easily.

PON'S STORY

Pon Edestus was born a slave, and from a young age his strength was valued by his owner above all other attributes. He was trained in combat and taught to fight for his master, but Pon had different ideas. He rebelled, and quite accidentally found himself at the center of a slave revolt that liberated hundreds of sentients. Unfortunately for Pon, he lost an arm in the battle and was nearly killed.

When Pon finally recovered from his wounds, he discovered that his arm had been replaced with a cybernetic and his freedom purchased by a scholar named Hethan Romund. Intrigued by his ability to survive wounds that should have killed anyone else, Romund had taken a special interest in Pon.

She asked the young Nautolan to serve as her bodyguard on a particularly dangerous world as she explored the supposed final resting place of a Jedi Knight. The mission, despite (or perhaps because of) Pon's relentless refusal to take anything seriously, was a success. As payment for his services, Romund gave Pon the dead Jedi's lightsaber, explaining to him that the Jedi had been champions of the oppressed and weak—just as Pon himself was.

Since then, Pon has been enjoying his freedom in the galaxy, selling his sword-arm and fighting on his own terms, not for any master. Although he seldom backs down from any fight or challenge, he prefers to fight on behalf of the weak and oppressed. When he received a distress call from his old friend Romund, he was happy to leap to her aid...

SARENDA'S STORY

Sarenda grew up with too many sisters and not enough space in a farmstead on the planet of Taanab. She was close to her sisters, and protective of them. More than one farmhand found himself face down in the dirt after a rude comment or a teasing gesture. As much as she was protective of her sisters and others, Sarenda did always enjoy seeing bullies get their just deserts.

But Sarenda also craved space to herself. She got some of it by helping her father and aunt in the garage and machine shop, repairing speeders and other farm equipment for hour after peaceful hour. She had a natural talent with the machines, and learned a great deal from her father and aunt. But the true escapes were her regular trips out into Taanab's wilderness, exploring wooded glens and rocky caverns, climbing trees, and scaring grunn dogs.

On one such trip, she found a secluded cave that opened up into a chamber with smooth, hand carved walls. There were ancient statues and carvings in the chamber, and the skeleton of a long-dead alien with a strange machine clutched in one withered talon. She brought the device home and worked on it in the machine shop. After hours of experimentation, she managed to activate the small cylinder, only to discover that it projected a blade of pure energy. The blade could cut through absolutely anything, and—to her satisfaction—proved very good at scaring away the local boys. Sarenda ran to her father to find out more.

Her father told her that the weapon was called a "lightsaber." Her aunt said that the fact that she had been able to repair it meant that she was sensitive to something called the Force. And it also meant that Sarenda had to leave Taanab. Her aunt gave her the name of one of her dear friends, a scholar named Hethan Romund, and told Sarenda to seek the scholar out. Unfortunately, Romund had been captured and taken to the planet of Spintir...

SASHA'S STORY

Sasha grew up nurtured by a loving family, far from the reach of the Empire and, in truth, civilization. Every now and again the family would pack up and move to another remote, uncivilized planet, full of unspoiled wilderness for Sasha to explore. What Sasha came to realize is that her parents were members of a group that would become the Rebel Alliance and were always on the run from Imperial authorities. When she became an adult, Sasha joined the Rebel Alliance as well, eager to do her part for the cause of galactic harmony and democracy.

Sasha's idealism did not survive contact with the enemy and neither did the rest of her Rebel cell. While on a recon mission on the planet Onderon, Sasha and her unit gave away their position, thanks to the dangerous native wildlife. Imperial forces, their attention drawn by blaster fire, responded with heavy artillery and a strike force of AT-ST walkers. When Sasha and her unit called for evacuation, they were told that no support would be forthcoming. Sasha was the only one to survive, hiding herself in the rugged hinterlands of the planet.

Her loyalty to the Rebel Alliance broken, Sasha began selling her skills as a scout to the highest bidder. While business on Onderon was quite good, Sasha was eager to leave the planet where she had seen so many of her friends die. An opportunity arose when a Twi'lek bounty hunter named Oskara came to Onderon and needed help tracking a bounty through wild country. Sasha led Oskara to her quarry and, in return, Oskara gave her a ride to Mos Shuuta on Tatooine.

In its own way, Tatooine has a wilderness as harsh as any jungle world, and Sasha was able to continue serving as a freelance scout, striking up friendships with Oskara and Teemo's lead mechanic, a human man named Mathus. The true danger on Tatooine for Sasha was the rule of the Hutts and their minions; enough of Sasha's idealism remained that guiding an indentured servant through the wilderness to a safehouse struck her as normal, even noble. When Teemo the Hutt found out that it was Sasha who helped the servant escape, he was not pleased—but apparently that had given Oskara an idea...

TARAST'S STORY

When Tarast Voon was young, he learned that he was touched by the Force. Elated, young Tarast asked if that meant he could join the Jedi Order, but it was not to be: young as he was, Tarast was considered too old to begin his Jedi training.

Shortly thereafter, the Jedi were exterminated by Darth Vader and the Empire at the close of the Clone Wars. Tarast, too old to begin training as a Jedi and too young to fight back against the Empire, went into hiding. First his family and then a wider and wider network of contacts throughout the galaxy smuggled Tarast from planet to planet, teaching him a little of their way of life on each world. Tarast's abiding curiosity found this agreeable, but as a youth he craved some constancy that he could not have. He developed a tendency to become fixated on his new challenges, perhaps as a way of coping with the uncertain life he was forced to lead.

Tarast spent fifteen years on the run from the Empire. He had looked forward to a future as a scholar, discovering the mysteries of the Force and the Jedi, but instead he found himself forced into the life of a renegade. Always a curious sort, he studied what he could of the Jedi, and managed to find a kindred spirit in the scholar Hethan Romund. Together, Tarast and Romund spent three years trawling far-flung libraries and examining ancient ruins. Romund even helped Tarast learn how to construct his own lightsaber. Unfortunately, a close call with an Imperial agent shortly thereafter convinced Tarast that his presence was endangering his friend, and the two reluctantly parted ways.

Now, years later, a distress call has reached Tarast Voon: his old friend Romund is in trouble!

TENDAAR'S STORY

A certain amount of dignity, refinement, and gravitas is expected from academics on Dac, the Mon Calamari homeworld. Education is highly prized in Mon Calamari society, and success in the academic sphere is an essential part of social status. To be well educated is to be, by definition, well bred.

As such, Tendaar Bel has always been a bit of an anomaly. Undeniably brilliant, Tendaar was an indifferent student at the Coral Collegium and a complete social misfit. In accordance with his family's wishes, he studied astrophysics. Or rather, he was enrolled in astrophysics classes that he never actually attended, instead preferring to spend time in his chambers or in the Lagoon, an undersea community of renegade computer techs who took delight in unorthodox solutions to seemingly unsolvable problems and in challenging what they saw as stodgy social conventions. Because of his reclusive lifestyle, Tendaar's social graces did not improve at the Coral Collegium.

His career would have continued to putter along this meandering path, but then the Empire arrived and enslaved his planet. Tendaar Bel went from frustrating Collegium student to indentured shipyard technician overnight. Tendaar spent years crafting starships and weapons of war for the Empire, and resentment finally began to give him a sense of purpose.

When Dac was finally freed and joined the Rebel Alliance, Tendaar eagerly signed on to do his part in undermining the Empire. Initially, Alliance High Command assigned him to work in the Mon Calamari shipyards, but Tendaar's disrespect for the social conventions of his own people proved problematic. He was reassigned to an R&D position on the A-wing project, where his unorthodox approach helped him solve certain persistent problems with the targeting computers, but he still chafed against regulations. Tendaar helped save the base on Cardoone from an Imperial assault by randomizing all of the starfighters' IFFs mid-battle, creating confusion for the untested A-wings to exploit. As a result, Alliance Command concluded that his true talent lay in unconventional-to-the-point-of-crazy thinking and assigned him as a tech expert for Special Operations. Tendaar enjoys the ever-changing puzzles of his duties, and takes particular pleasure in finding unorthodox ways to fight the Empire.

VENDRI'S STORY

Vendri DeRalm is the inheritor of a legacy of generations of explorers and wanderers, traveling from star to star across the galaxy. The Duros people have always placed a high value on discovery and travel, being one of several species with competing claims to be the inventors of the hyperdrive in the distant past. Vendri has long enjoyed traveling to unspoiled and verdant worlds, where he can explore the natural beauty to his heart's content. For years, Vendri made his living as a wildlife and landscape holographer, taking 2-, 3-, and 4-dimensional images of exotic locales and animals. In that time, he became extremely adept at passing unseen to line up the perfect shot.

Over the last few years, as the Empire has consolidated its power, Vendri's life has become more complicated. His homeworld has been reassigned to a new sector with a new, human governor. His main business, traveling across the galaxy, now requires more paperwork and inspections than ever before, and more than once, his cargo of biological specimens has been either seized with no explanation or completely spoiled during "customs inspections" by Imperial officials. Vendri himself is routinely selected by human officers for "random inspections," and he has been arrested three times on trumped up charges (until he could pay the proper bribe).

The whole situation, Vendri concluded, had become completely intolerable. The Empire was human-controlled and routinely exploiting and harassing non-humans like him. So when he was contacted by a mysterious figure identifying herself only as "Mother," Vendri was only too happy to help the Rebel Alliance. His duties started small, gathering intelligence and acting as courier (although his non-human status complicated the latter role; Vendri was forced to commit messages to memory). Eventually, Vendri reported for advanced training on a small, forested moon called Yavin 4, where he finally met "Mother" face-to-face and discovered that she was a Duros, like him. During his training, Vendri's new superiors discovered that his career as a wildlife holographer had made him quite handy in rough country, and so they attached him to Alliance Special Operations Command. Vendri's duties now consist primarily of reconnaissance of lightly populated worlds, often in advance of or in conjunction with a Special Operations team.

ZAL'S STORY

Zal Artha never fit in. Born and raised on Chandrila, Zal should have been a nature-loving, peace-making scholar like most of the rest of her family and, in fact, most of the rest of the planet. But while her brother and sisters were playing with their pet squalls and taking dance and elocution lessons, Zal was racing speeders through the crystal canyons and breaking curfew.

As soon as she was old enough, Zal left Chandrila and enrolled in the Rengali Imperial Naval Academy, bringing nothing with her from Chandrila but a lucky charm made for her by her older brother. All she wanted out of life was to sit behind the stick of a starfighter. While at the academy, Zal faced constant harassment, discrimination, and derision from instructors and students alike. Undeterred, Zal pushed through and distinguished herself time and time again before graduation. Unfortunately, discrimination graduated with her. After being turned down for numerous choice assignments, she was finally placed as a shuttle pilot (a post Zal found at least as boring as contemplating the idyllic beauty of the woods back on Chandrila). When she shared her frustration with a friendly Senator she was ferrying, she finally learned why she had been denied a combat posting: Imperial Naval Command suspected her of Rebel sympathies due to her Chandrilan upbringing.

Frustrated with the Empire and unhappy with her stalled career, Zal decided to prove Imperial Naval Command right and defected to the Rebel Alliance. She was assigned to a starfighter squadron, the Soaring Dactillions. In mere weeks, she was piloting an X-wing in combat situations. After a high-attrition raid on the Fondor shipyards left the Dactillions under strength, her squadron was reassigned as test pilots for the new A-wing fighter, stationed on Cardooine.

A week later, the Dactillions scrambled again, this time using untested prototype A-wing fighters to repulse an Imperial raid on Cardooine. Though the Dactillions pushed back the Imperials and A-wing proved itself a superlative interceptor, the cost was high. Zal, perhaps protected by her lucky charm, was one of only two Soaring Dactillions to survive the battle. In the wake of these events, Zal requested (and received) a transfer to Special Operations. Zal couldn't be happier with this assignment, or with her role in the Rebellion.

MASK OF THE PIRATE QUEEN

In the far-flung reaches of the Outer Rim, a band of space pirates calling themselves the VEILED SORORITY singles out the ZANN CONSORTIUM and its lucrative smuggling operation.

TYBER ZANN himself has issued a large bounty on the Sorority's self-proclaimed PIRATE QUEEN, wanted dead or alive—Imperial Peace-Keeping Certificate optional. Bounty hunters flock to Taleucema in the crater-ridden wilds of Saleucami to find the trail of their elusive mark....

Engineering report, sir," Ensign Narish announced, and Captain Riles spun his chair around to face her. "Minor fluctuation in the portside engine's output, but the chief says it won't cause too much trouble before Saleucami."

Riles nodded as he took the datapad from the young Twi'lek. "Well done, ensign," he said, signing off on the report and handing the datapad back to her. Riles turned back to the ship's console, but Narish still stood at attention.

"Is there something else?"

Narish nodded. "Zevrix has received a transmission from Ryloth, sir. There are reports of pirate activity along our route. Shall we raise the convoy's alert status?"

The captain blinked at her question. "Pirates?" he asked incredulously.

"Yes, captain," Narish said. "The communiqué warns all ships in the area to be on guard."

Riles laughed. "No pirate would be foolish enough to attack a Consortium convoy," he replied. "Zann's got them all tied up in his webs."

"But the communiqué came from *Ryloth*, sir," she said, stressing the planet's name. Any message from Ryloth, Consortium headquarters, was as good as from Tyber Zann himself.

"I've made this run a dozen times, ensign," Riles said, his voice echoing louder than he intended. He caught himself, and reassured her, "We've nothing to be afraid of."

His words sounded hollow. Everyone aboard the *Censure* had heard rumors about the recent attacks; a vicious band of buccaneers had even dared to capture one of the Consortium's own transports. Hushed voices around galley tables spoke of the transport's crew, butchered to the last when they refused to heave to and take on boarders.

Those worried whispers could not say which ship had been taken, and until now there had been no proof, but the communiqué from Ryloth gave the tales an air of legitimacy. Riles glanced surreptitiously at the crew—every eye was upon him. Blast Narish! Blast Zevrix, too!

"Very well, ensign," he nodded. "Raise the alert status to ready. Will that suffice?"

Narish, relieved, nodded. "Aye, sir," she said.

"Inform all sections of the change." *Get out of my sight*, he thought as she scurried away to her station. *She'll feel more the fool once we've docked securely in—*

"Unknown vessel emerging from hyperspace, Captain," Ops Officer Vensin interrupted a bit too loudly. "And another...two more, sir!"

Riles closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. It was like a self-fulfilling prophecy. "Raise shields," he ordered sullenly. "Increase speed to flank. Gunners to their stations."

"Aye," Vensin replied. "Two more ships, captain! That's five altogether."

"I can count, Vensin, thank you." Riles pulled up his own display and glanced over the sensor readings. Five ships, one of them a *Consular*-class cruiser, were maneuvering into attack position.

Zevrix chimed in from the comm station, his Verpine voice sounding out the words in clicks and buzzes. "They are hailing us, captain."

"Don't keep them waiting, then," he replied. "Put it on speaker."

A burst of static assaulted the bridge, then silenced. "This is the captain of the *Renegade's Blood*," announced a feminine, whispering voice. "Order your vessels to heave to and prepare to be boarded. You have one standard minute to comply."

Riles opened his mouth to answer, but the signal had already been dropped. No chance for parley, then, he thought as he chewed his lower lip. No Consortium threats or bribes would be offered or accepted today.

"Send an encoded transmission to the rest of the convoy," Riles instructed Zevrix. "Order them to repel all boarders. Any captain who surrenders to these scum will be executed by me personally."

"But sir!" Narish objected. "You've heard the stories! If we don't surrender, they'll kill us all!"

Under normal circumstances, Riles might have shot Narish for her insubordination. Instead, he smiled and slowly shook his head. "And what do you think Tyber Zann will do to us if we submit?"

Narish's blue skin paled.

"Sit down, ensign," Riles ordered her. "If we're dead either way, let's make them pay for the privilege."

Force And Destiny

What secrets lie in the Well of Shadows? Let's find out."

Kasuni Tamm set her back against the rock and pushed. With a grating rumble, the capstone slid aside. The weak rays of the winter sun danced across the layers of hoarfrost that covered the rough-hewn stones. Kasuni peered over the edge, then lit a glow rod and tossed it in. The brilliant green light fell through the shaft, briefly illuminating the walls before vanishing into the depths.

Kasuni Tamm pursed her lips and glanced over at Vaxim. "I guess they weren't kidding when they said 'bottomless,' huh?"

The bogwing seemed to laugh, a blend of chirps and croaks. Kasuni grinned. "Maybe you could fly down there, and see what's at the bottom?"

Vaxim turned away and started scratching for insects in the gorse around the rim. "Coward."

Twenty minutes later, Kasuni hung fifty meters down the well, staring intently at a patch of stonework. It looked no different than any of the other rocks she'd rappelled past, but something about it spoke to her. The Togruta closed her eyes and ran her free hand across the rough surface, tracing the whorls of frost. Vaxim chirped.

"Yeah, there is something here," Kasuni murmured. "It feels...old. Like the rock is asleep. But something about this stone..."

She pushed, and the stone slid inwards. A roughly circular portion of the wall followed suit, revealing the passageway beyond. "Yes! Vaxim, we're in!"

Kasuni swung into the entrance, deftly detaching her climbing gear and securing the rope. She made her way through the cramped passage, crouching to avoid scraping her montrals on the low ceiling. Vaxim swooped on ahead, and in a few moments, she heard his triumphant chirp.

The passageway opened up to a vast cavern. The cave had once been natural; flowstone formations

and stalagmites still lined the walls. However, someone had hewn steps into the floor—steps that led to an octagonal pedestal in the cavern's center. And on the pedestal...

Kasuni's breath caught in her throat. Vaxim swooped around the cavern and settled onto her shoulder, quietly burbling in satisfaction. She walked up the steps and stared down at the pedestal, studying the small, ornate cube. She reached down to pick it up.

"I would appreciate if you did not touch that." The measured voice echoed through the chamber.

Kasuni whirled around, her hand moving to the carbine slung over her shoulder. Three figures stepped out of the passageway. The first two were humans: one an older man with a gray beard and black combat armor, the other a small woman with an intense, unsettling expression and thick brown robes. The last, the one who spoke, was a Kel Dor, who towered over his companions.

"I recognize you," Kasuni said, nodding toward the older man. "You're the traveling merchant I met in the village. I don't remember the armor, though."

The man looked slightly embarrassed. "Yes. A necessary deception, I'm afraid, Mistress Tamm. My name is actually Markus Dorivonn. This is Zora," he gestured to the woman, "and Dal Kir."

The Kel Dor nodded. "We have been looking for this item for quite some time. Strange that you should have found it so quickly."

Kasuni shrugged. "Just lucky, I guess."

Markus raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps; perhaps not. In any case, we can't let the holocron fall into Sor Venge's hands. You need to give it to us."

From Kasuni's shoulder, Vaxim hissed. Kasuni shook her head. "Sorry, people. This box is the map to a place I desperately want to find. Besides, what's a 'Sor Venge,' anyway?"

Markus was about to respond, when Zora placed a hand on his shoulder. "She's not one of Venge's people," she said.

"How do you know?"

Zora looked coolly at Kasuni. "She's not lying; I can tell." Suddenly she paused, head cocked. "I hear someone in the passageway." A small metal cylinder dropped out of the sleeve of her robe and into her hand, and she whirled around.

A volley of blaster bolts exploded out of the passage, only to be deflected in mid-air as a double-bladed lightsaber ignited in Dal Kir's hands. More bolts shot toward the Kel Dor, who spun the weapon in flashing arcs. The shots ricocheted away, scorching stone and throwing up chips of rock.

Behind the blaster bolts, a dark-robed figure charged from the opening, howling a challenge as it swung a crimson lightsaber in sweeping arcs. Zora ignited her own blade, flicking it up in a perfunctory salute before meeting her opponent with a crushing overhead strike. The figure sidestepped the blow, only to stagger backward when Zora redirected her momentum and shouldered him viciously in the chest.

Kasuni unslung her carbine and snapped off a shot at the stormtroopers now starting to pour out of the passage. She saw one go down, the rest taking cover behind the flowstone formations. Markus, his own lightsaber ignited, was backing towards her while deflecting any shots that came in his direction. "These are Venge's agents! I think it's safe to say they want all of us dead."

Kasuni kept up her fire from behind the protection of his blade. "Well, given the circumstances, I'm willing to work with you three—for now. Do you know a way out of here?"

Markus shook his head. "Just up the Well, and that's going to be crawling with stormtroopers." Zora drove her opponent back with a furious swing, quickly raising her guard to block the equally savage riposte. The two lightsabers flashed and hissed as the duel continued. "We'd never make it up."

"Hm." Kasuni closed her eyes for a moment, concentrating. Then she pointed at one of the stone steps before the pedestal. "There. Cut through that!"

Markus's saber flashed down, slicing through rock in three controlled swings. The step crumbled, revealing darkness below: a hidden passage. "We've got an exit!"

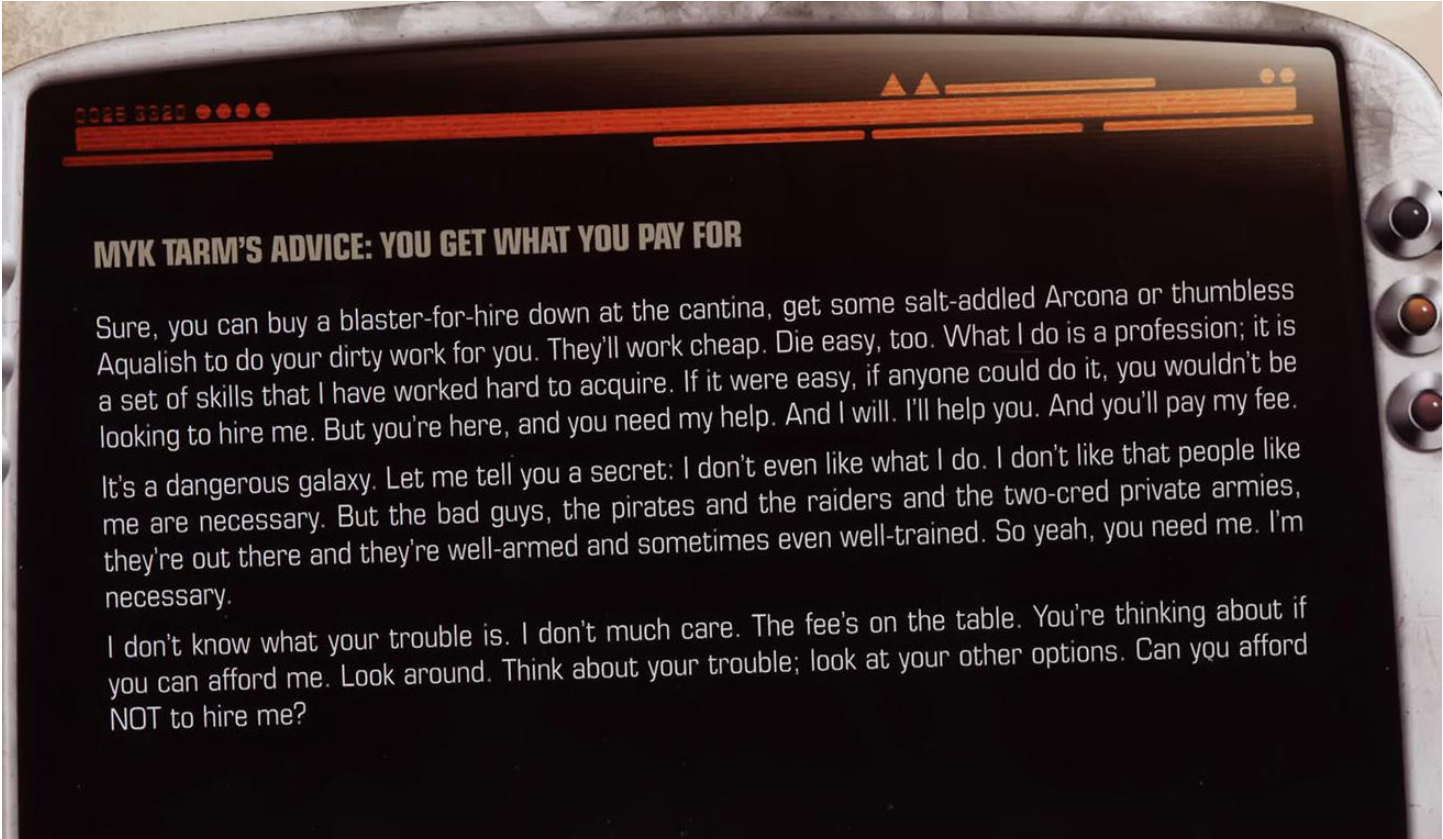
Dal Kir had dropped at least one stormtrooper with reflected blaster shots. Now he lowered his lightsaber and raised his free hand. Kasuni felt her skin tingle and she stared, wide-eyed, as all around the chamber, small rocks and stones began to rise into the air.

Suddenly, the Kel Dor dropped into a fighting crouch and thrust his fist forward. The stones, the stormtroopers, and even the dark figure flew backward as if struck by a blast of wind, landing in the passageway in a tangle. Dal Kir straightened, then ran for the steps. Zora spat at her prone opponent and followed.

As the four climbed into the secret passage, Markus paused for a moment and looked at Kasuni. "Just lucky, huh?"

Kasuni smirked. "I guess I make my own luck."

Markus returned her grin as they jumped into the darkness. "Right. Have you ever heard of something called the Force?"



MYK TARM'S ADVICE: YOU GET WHAT YOU PAY FOR

Sure, you can buy a blaster-for-hire down at the cantina, get some salt-addled Arcona or thumbless Aqualish to do your dirty work for you. They'll work cheap. Die easy, too. What I do is a profession; it is a set of skills that I have worked hard to acquire. If it were easy, if anyone could do it, you wouldn't be looking to hire me. But you're here, and you need my help. And I will. I'll help you. And you'll pay my fee.

It's a dangerous galaxy. Let me tell you a secret: I don't even like what I do. I don't like that people like me are necessary. But the bad guys, the pirates and the raiders and the two-cred private armies, they're out there and they're well-armed and sometimes even well-trained. So yeah, you need me. I'm necessary.

I don't know what your trouble is. I don't much care. The fee's on the table. You're thinking about if you can afford me. Look around. Think about your trouble; look at your other options. Can you afford NOT to hire me?

Force And Destiny: Nexus of Power

She had traveled for weeks, searching for her foe among the gorges and peaks of the endless mountain range. Now, Torva stepped through the entrance of the underground lair, the blue glow from her lightsaber pike glinting off the wet stone walls. The passageway stretched on ahead of her, burrowing into the depths of the mountain. Somewhere ahead, among the mountain's roots, her foe waited.

As she pressed deeper into the cavern, Torva passed beyond the daylight shining through the threshold. Soon, her saber was her only source of light, its steady glow unable to even reach the walls on either side.

From both sides of the passage, creatures lunged out of the darkness with arms outstretched. Torva barely managed to duck beneath a wild swing, gore-stained claws whipping by centimeters above her head. She clumsily turned her dodge into a roll, trying to get clear of her attackers.

Springing to her feet, Torva caught glimpses of malformed bodies, matted fur, and red, beady eyes. They rushed her, and she struck back hastily.

A blow with the butt of her lightsaber pike sent one stumbling, leaving her an opening to cut the other in twain with a sweeping strike. The monster howled as it collapsed, and the acrid smell of burned fur filled Torva's nose. The first creature stumbled to its feet and lunged at her...only to impale itself on her set blade.

Torva pulled the blade free and looked down at the bodies of the monsters she had killed. Her body trembled with tension and she panted slightly as she held the blade up.

The "creatures" were humans, feral men wearing stinking furs from some predator animal. They had strapped the predator's claws to their hands to make crude weapons. Torva looked over their emaciated features, the desperate pain in their eyes. Her stomach turned. She swallowed, looking away from their grievous wounds, and continued on.

Soon Torva saw flickering orange light ahead, and she stepped into a vast amphitheater in the heart of the mountain. Though it had started as a natural cavern, someone had hewn rows of benches from the stone. The benches sloped down to surround a flat stage at the center of the amphitheater.

Four figures stood on the stage, illuminated by the light of a dozen guttering torches. Three—a man, woman, and little boy—were chained to posts set into the rock. They sagged against their bonds, exhausted. The fourth stood in front of them and faced Torva squarely. A young woman with silver hair that matched Torva's own, she wore clothes finely decorated with firegems and gold thread, and studied Torva with cold, cruel eyes.

"So, sister. You finally decided to meet me face-to-face."

"I did," Torva agreed evenly. She slowly picked her way across the benches. "You knew I was going to come, Morana."

Morana let her coat fall open. Her hand drifted to the hilt of a vibrosword. "That's far enough."

Torva stopped. Her muscles tensed, and her grip tightened on the haft of her lightsaber pike.

"I must say, I've been looking forward to this," Morana sneered. "I've been wondering if you actually had the nerve to fight me."

Torva shook her head in a quick, jerking motion. "No, I'm not here to fight you."

Her sister paused, her head cocked. "What did you say?"

"I said I'm not here to fight you. I'm here to stop you. I'm here to save you." Torva spoke quickly, nervously.

Morana threw her head back and laughed, a deep roaring chuckle that rolled around the stone walls of the amphitheater and echoed mockingly in Torva's ears. "You're here to save me. Of course you are. After I've pillaged these lands, burned villages, killed scores of people. But you, sister, are here to save me."

Torva looked Morana in the eyes. She took a long, shuddering breath, then deliberately lifted her lightsaber pike and threw it to the side. "I am."

Morana's face twisted in sudden fury. "You think I'm just going to change my mind? You stupid fool." She pulled the vibrosword from its sheath and flipped the activation stud, then strode from the stage. She advanced on Torva with the blade raised. Torva stood, shivering slightly, and waited.

She swung, only to stop the blade centimeters from Torva's face. Her face working with confused rage, Morana held the blade, trembling, a moment away from striking Torva down.

"You don't have to do this," Torva's voice quaked. "You can stop. You can stop all of this. Just put down the weapon, put down your hatred, and this can all finally be over."

Morana stared at her for a long time, and for a moment Torva thought she might do it. Then her expression returned to controlled, cruel scorn. Her free hand came up, and she slapped Torva across the mouth, hard. "Pah. And to think I expected more from you. Fine, sister. I won't kill you."

She whirled around and walked back to the stage, raising her sword again. The boy cried, and the man and woman struggled against their chains, fear bringing new strength to their tired limbs. Morana continued talking as she walked towards the man. "Just know that there's a price to pay for your pacifistic platitudes. The real world doesn't let you sit idly—"

Morana paused. Staggered. Coughed. She looked down, to see the tip of Torva's lightsaber protruding from her chest. She tried to turn, but suddenly her limbs failed, and she collapsed on the stage.

Torva stood with her arm still outstretched from where she used the Force to pick up her lightsaber pike and throw it. A single tear ran down her cheek. "I am going to save you, even from yourself." Her voice slipped slightly. "I'm so sorry."

The cavern rippled around her and faded, leaving Torva in darkness.

Torva stepped out onto the side of the mountain, blinking in the bright sunlight. She didn't bother looking back. The small cave set among the rocks had no more trials for her.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" Gerant asked, still sitting on the boulder where Torva left him.

She nodded, slowly. "I think so."

"And does that make you a Jedi, now?"

She shook her head, a haunted look crossing her face. "I don't think so. This was just a step."



Esseles Welcomes Jatz Singer Roi to New Home

Calamar, Esseles

The famous and sometimes controversial jatz performer Fitz Roi has quite abruptly chosen to transfer his permanent residence from his family's estate on Lenniera to the capital of Esseles, Calamar.

He left his home three weeks ago for one of his impromptu galactic tours, and apparently decided he didn't want to go back.

"Home just got kind of dull, you know?" Roi said in an interview in the Calamar Spaceport VIP Lounge, as he waited for his immigration visa to clear customs. "Same old thing day after day, what a feddin' bother. I hate getting into ruts. It interferes with my slipping the beam, if you know what I mean, musically. So, here I am, shaking things up a bit," he said, arms spread wide to encompass all of Esseles.

If past history is to judge, Roi will do plenty of shaking up on Esseles. He has lost four megacorp sponsors in as many years due to wild stunts which have invariably backfired. Roi has been without a sponsor for over a year now, and says he is enjoying his independence. "I go where I want, now. Before, my suits liked me showing in strictly class A Core-approved environments to make them look good. Now, hey, I can slum like I did as a kid."

Local fans were overjoyed to discover that their idol has come to live among them. Aliea Tanner, the 14 year-old president of the Fitz Fan Club of Amander Public School, was on hand at the spaceport to award Roi a holo crystal she and her classmates had made which generates an image of Roi's beloved and forever lost trademark guns. "I just can't believe I really met him!" she exclaimed after presenting him the gift. "He was so mandin' cute!"

Roi has just returned from what he calls a journey of rediscovery in the Outer Colonies. "Wild place, the Colonies, great music out there," Roi said. "Ever heard of the Bith? You will, when my next holo goes out."

by Janna Dixon, TriNebulon News

OPERATION: ELROOD

Jacob Nive shifted slightly in his command chair as he surveyed the *Backstab's* bridge. His crewers were disciplined and ready for action. They were as good as any group in the Imperial Navy or the Rebel Alliance. And very soon now he would prove that to the rest of the galaxy.

A fair-haired youth entered the bridge and headed directly for Nive's chair. Nive thought to himself, *The boy has enthusiasm. He'll make a fine pirate if he doesn't get himself killed.* "What is it, young Melx? Have our friends on Coyn found us another cargo shipment for the taking?"

Melx shoved the datapad towards Nive in barely-contained excitement. "Better, Captain Nive! We've been so successful in raiding Imperial convoys that Moff Andal got another ship. The Star Destroyer *Brazen*."

Nive sneered. "And I suppose that Andal believes this new captain will do any better than those buffoons Pryl and Zed? By now he should know better than to believe his intelligence reports."

"The *Brazen's* captain is Dadefra."

Nive's eyes widened in surprise and a wicked grin crossed his face. "Dadefra! Well, that changes things, doesn't it? It has been a very long time since our last battle. This time, I will stand over his broken body and choke the life out of him. The Khuiumin Survivors will have their revenge!"

Jacob Nive's thoughts drifted back many years to the great battle in Khuiumin system. *Once we stood 8,000 strong, but within a day the Emperor's Star Destroyers reduced us to nothing. Dadefra and his lackeys had whittled us down to barely 300. No, I have not forgotten you, captain. When the time is right I will strike like a knife in the darkness. And as your life slips from your body, you shall see my face!*

Communique #84B93L1

To: Chalmer Trillih

From: The Khuiumin

I commend you. It isn't easy to get a message to your band. With our recent arrival in the sector, your reputation has fallen on our ears at every turn. For this reason, I have a proposal for you.

The rumors you've heard about us are true. Now you have a chance to join our ranks. We will have our revenge. Those who stand beside us will be known across the galaxy. You can share in our glorious victory. We anxiously await a response.

End Communique.



A Brutal Welcome



Private Kinard eased the breath mask over his face and tightened the straps. He checked his gear — survival belt, backpack, blaster rifle, and the breath mask — one more time. Anxiously, he glanced at the faces of the other nine members of the team.

With a metallic click, the hatch of the *Lambda*-class shuttle *Toranni* opened. Bright sunlight spilled into the dark recesses of the passenger hold, intensified by the glare of the ocean. Cautiously, the team moved out into the brilliant, warm day with Kinard pulling up the rear. Private Tracher nodded approval as he looked up from his atmosphere scanner and the team peeled off the uncomfortable breath masks.

The shuttle occupied a small atoll; nearby, a volcano poured smoke into the atmosphere. Kinard thought, *What possible value could this planet have?* Before he could begin to answer that question, the ocean came alive with movement.

Water churned and rippled at the base of the atoll as several large black forms pulled themselves from the ocean. They clambered onto the rocky surface with their serpentine bodies glistening in the bright sunlight.

Private Kinard was repulsed by the creatures as he clenched his blaster rifle closer to his body. There were six ... then eight ... more than 20 of them arrived before the water's surface became still.

For several moments, both sides stared at each other in amazement. Then, one of the aliens stepped forward. The air was pierced by a blaster shot and the alien dropped to the ground, motionless. Within seconds, the air was filled with more blaster bolts as the throng of aliens closed on the Imperial troopers.

As the last surviving creature hastily retreated towards the ocean, Private Kinard counted 16 dead alien bodies on the atoll. Besides a few cuts and bruises, the Imperial team was unscathed. *We won*, thought Private Kinard, *but will I forgive myself for firing the first shot?*

Cut-Away

In the Lair of the Monster ...

Read aloud:

INTERIOR: LUD CHUD'S LAIR. *Deep in a subterranean chamber, a creature sits on its throne. Quietly, the multi-legged thing cackles and amuses itself, its upper mandibles opening and closing in contemplation of its next meal. The Rakaan crime boss Lud Chud is ready for a feast.*

Webbed cocoons dangle in the darkness. Tiny flickers of movement come from inside each: those trapped within these webbed prisons are still alive.

Just as the Rakaan reaches for a cocoon, a whistle indicates that a visitor has entered the chamber. Chud's alien eyes fall upon the sight of a dangerous-looking alien. A small hologram of Mikos Argdran appears next to the hunter.

Slowly, menacingly, Lud Chud speaks. "Well, bounty hunter? Is it done? Is the fixer finished?"

CLOSE-UP: ALIEN BOUNTY HUNTER. *The bounty hunter hesitates a moment. Despite its alien features, its reluctance is obvious.*

"Not exactly."

MEDIUM SHOT: CHUD'S LAIR. *Lud Chud arranges itself on the throne, irritated. "A simple task I gave you. Kill the fixer and collect your reward."*

Chud yanks down one of the nearby cocoons. The hunter stammers a reply.

"We had a problem ... you see, we dumped the fixer out the door. Figured he'd splatter real nice on the ground ... but another ship came from nowhere! They must have been his friends or something! They plucked him from the sky! We tried to stop them ..."

"What? You promised me you would take care of it! All you had to do was kill the little furless rodent!"

"But ..."

"This is what I get for trusting a bunch of amateurs!" The Rakaan throws the cocoon to the ground with a sickening thud. "You were fooled by Mikos. He obviously has friends. Powerful friends, yes. Apparently, he is not as stupid as he pretends to be."

The hunter grimaces, obviously terrified. "We can find him again. Get his friends, too. For free."

"Never mind. I'll deal with him and his friends on my own terms."

Lud Chud turns away before the bounty hunter can utter the retort on his lips. The Rakaan rocks back and forth in irritation.

"Your friends will curse the day they met you, Mikos Argdran. So I swear!"

Cut to ...

EXTERIOR: PLANET MERISEE, MERISEE PRIME STARPORT

The Face of the Enemy

Read aloud:

EXTERIOR: OBSERVATION BOXES IN THE ARENA OF GAMES. *In a set of observation boxes above the gladiatorial ring, Imperial officials are gathering for the day's contest. The many stormtroopers suddenly snap to attention as the barrel-chested, bushy-eyebrowed General Hul enters, accompanied by Moff Andal and his wife. Andal takes the center seat, surveying the arena with a look of stern approval.*

"Remarkable. It looks just like the arena on Coyn. A timeless formula for holding power: entertain the bored masses while getting rid of traitorous annoyances. The Emperor will be pleased."

"The games are honored by your presence, Moff Andal." General Hul takes a seat and gestures to his six Coynite mercenaries, who quickly take up protective positions to either side of the General, the Moff and his wife.

"And who shall be playing this day?" A chilling grin forms on the Moff's face.

"We have four contestants. Two are supporters of the resistance. Today's games will teach the population the consequences of acts against the Empire. Another is a certain Rebel agent we have been

tracking for some time. ISB agent Cayble and an assistant finally captured her on Torina. I found great pleasure in sentencing her to today's games."

"You are referring to Shondra Del, of course. What a relief that she was finally captured. Her supporters are growing far too numerous here on Derilyn. And the last?"

Hul's eyes narrow as he selects a cup of Bellorian ale offered by a serving droid. One of his mercenaries steps forward and carefully samples the contents with an analyzer. Not satisfied with simply checking the beverage, the Coynite pours a sample into a cup of his own and drinks it. Satisfied, he nods and passes the cup to Hul.

"The last is ... a nuisance. You could say that he was an old gambling debt that I finally paid off. This Argdran fellow approached me, claiming he had something of worth to sell. Too bad what I owed Chud was far greater than anything the fixer could offer. Eliminating him will solve a great many problems."

The Moff nods in silent agreement. "Then let the games begin."

Cut to ...

EXTERIOR: THE ARENA'S GLADIATORIAL FLOOR.

Read aloud:

EXTERIOR: OBSERVATION BOXES IN THE ARENA OF GAMES. *General Hul storms around the spectator box, his fists clawing at invisible enemies. The governor suddenly turns on the room's furniture, kicking and throwing pieces around like they're children's toys. Goblets smash against transparisteel windows while chairs are smashed to splinters. His closest aides look on in shocked silence.*

An aide silently steps into the room. Thinking better of interrupting the General, the aide stands in silence.

Finally, General Hul notices the aide. "What is it?"

"Sir. We've received a priority communication from Captain Dadebra of the Brazen!"

"Report."

"They encountered a pirate force hiding near the Degan Gas Clouds ... beyond all original estimates, sir. The Brazen has been severely damaged. They have a large number of casualties. The ship is coming in to dock with the defense platform right now. It should arrive by 2200 hours, local time."

General Hul turns and gazes out onto the now-empty Arena. There's little indication of the carnage from earlier in the day.

"Rebels. Resistance fighters. Pirates. Perhaps what I suspected all along is true. I have been far too lenient on these people. They still have too much spirit. Effective immediately, Derilyn is under total martial law. I want all military patrols doubled. Searches of private residences may be conducted at will. Interrogate the citizens, confiscate personal property, tighten the mandatory curfews. Execute anyone who shows even the slightest disrespect for the Empire's authority. Disable the communication grids so the people here are cut off from the rest of the galaxy. Let them think they're on their own. I want a complete lockdown in the starport — no one gets on or off this planet until further notice.

"Get the work crews up to the Space Platform. I want the Brazen to be operational as soon as possible. And order Agent Cayble to meet me at my residence. It seems his work is not over yet."

Cut to ...

EXTERIOR: TEKAR STARPORT

Fellow agents. Congratulations on the destruction of the *Brazen*. The mission was a great blow against the Empire and from what I hear, General Hul and Moff Andal are on the verge of being removed from their offices. One can only hope.

In case you're wondering what everyone else thinks happened, I thought you might find the following NewsNet report interesting.

If you need me, you know where to find me. I'm sure we'll end up working together again ...

Shondra

36:4:16/IHV/TS66/DER.5.TEK/MIL

INVESTIGATION ON BRAZEN EXPLOSION CONTINUES

DERILYN, DERILYN SYSTEM: While repairs continue on the Derilyn Space Defense Platform, the investigation continues to determine what caused the explosion of the Star Destroyer *Brazen*. Moff Andal's office has refused comment except to say that Imperial inspectors are conducting the "most thorough investigation possible," including examination of all electronic and holographic records of the incident. None of this material has been released to the press, but it will be distributed once the investigation is concluded.

Anonymous sources aboard the Defense Platform indicate that worker error or a power overload near the main reactor may have been the cause of the explosion. Worker reports of a "heated space battle" just before the explosion are being discounted as "hysteria" and "Rebel propaganda."



36:4:21/HUT/NAR.4.SHD/TRD

Empire Takes Over Mid-Rim's Droid Market

Nar Shaddaa Node

With no warning, Imperial officers arrived at the corporate offices of Banske Tech on Chamble yesterday and announced that the Empire was nationalizing the entire company, while a company of troopers arrived to establish a garrison in the nearby manufacturing plants. Within hours, similar reports were coming in from Sencil Corp on Churba, Reiber Manufacturing on Jeyell, and SGI Systems, Inc. on Druckenwell.

In one fell swoop, the Empire has apparently seized the assets of the major manufacturers of black market assassin droid matrixes and mission-specific components in the entire Mid-Rim region. This move has produced a great deal of alarm and confusion for those involved in the underground assassin robotics market.

Clients and customers of the four companies have good reason to be nervous if Imperial investigators manage to obtain shipping manifests and delivery addresses from company records, since conviction of unauthorized ownership of an assassin droid carries a death sentence. Several prominent politicians and government officials have already vanished since the seizures, though it is unclear at this point whether they have fled to avoid arrest or whether they have indeed been arrested.

The legitimate financial markets were rocked as news spread of the sudden disintegration of Banske and SGI Systems, both major megacorps with diversified legitimate holdings. Investors on Coruscant, Corellia, and other worlds were horrified to discover that their shares in these previously stable AAA-rated firms had become worthless in the space of two hours. The sudden move caused a major collapse in the Ralltiir Exchange, and delivered what is probably the final death blow to a market which has been crippled since the Imperial crackdown there last quarter.

Market experts predict that prices for black market assassin droids in the region will skyrocket in the near term, as supplies dwindle and as Imperial agents shut down existing pipelines. Buyers will likely be required to travel to the CSA and out to the Outer Rim to obtain models in the future, since local distribution channels are now compromised.

Nal Hutta Kal'tamok, Basic Edition

36:5:16/CND/A35G/TIN.4.VAL/GEN

Tombat Raids Moff's Vault

Val Denn, Tinnel IV

In what local law enforcement officials are describing as yet another Tombat heist, the private vault of Moff Jerjerrod of Quanta Sector was burgled late last night local time. The theft came during or following a large party in his estates. The Moff himself would not comment, but is reportedly enraged at the theft.

This theft on the grounds of the Moff's estate comes as a grave embarrassment to the Moff's security staff, which is working around the clock to run down leads that will lead to the arrest of the perpetrator. The staff has rebuffed efforts by the local police to get involved in the investigation. "We'll do this our way," said Inspector Cammel Atarul. "We have a few leads, and are currently following those up. What we don't need is a gaggle of backwater jawacops mucking about." He refused to speculate as to who might have committed the crime. "But rest assured, we will find him!"

Another official in the Moff's staff was less sanguine. "Right, maybe we'd have a chance against a common criminal, but this was the work of that damned Tombat. He left his mark—who else could pull this off?" he said, displaying the small blue quella gem found only in the Alderaan system. The Tombat traditionally leaves such a gem at the scene of the crime to taunt investigators.

Another characteristic of a Tombat heist is that only jewels and artwork are taken. An official close to the Moff stated that missing from the vaults are several priceless works from the Moff's famed art collection. Sensitive data disks also in the vaults were left undisturbed.

This is the first appearance of the Tombat in some time. His most recent appearance before striking on Tinnel was the Spira Heist during the annual Spira Regatta Open.

Moff Jerjerrod was celebrating his new appointment when the theft took place. Next month Jerjerrod officially assumes his new duties as director of Imperial Energy Systems, a new subdepartment of the Ministry of Energy formed to develop a new line of large-scale portable power plants for use in disaster relief efforts.

Core News Digest

JAN Terrorist Captured

Eldrooden, Eldrood

The fugitive leader of Findris' most violent anti-Empire underground group was captured by security forces after landing on Eldrood using false identity papers.

Eldrood Starport Command Security Chief Alden Kraimer confirmed that Earnst Kamiel was a key leader of the terrorist Justice Action Network, which has claimed responsibility for the bombings of various civil authority buildings throughout the Colonies, each resulting in thousands of deaths.

Kamiel is being held in Eldrooden at an undisclosed location for extradition to Haldeen Sector, where he will be tried in Imperial Court.

Colonial News Nets

New Bormea Tariff Disrupts Chandrila Exports

Curamalle, Corulag

COMP NOR's move last week to place new tariffs on luxury agri-exports from Bormea Sector may have passed unnoticed by such member worlds as Corulag and Brentaal, which do not have significant agricultural exports, but it was a different scene altogether on Chandrila.

Chandrila, with one of the highest agricultural export rates in the Core Worlds, has had a virtual corner on the Core market in highly perishable luxury foods and spices, and this recent move will all but cripple this market.

The move was not altogether unexpected, since Chandrila has taken a rather hostile view of Imperial interests in the past. Governor Holleck promises to do his best to remove the tariff as soon as possible. In the meantime, he said, the Chandrilan government might take more robust measures to improve relations with Coruscant.

Core News Digest

Nereus Reaches New Accord With Bakuran Leadership

Salis D'aar, Bakura

After several months of negotiating, Governor Wilek Nereus and the Bakuran Senate have reached an uneasy agreement on the governance of Bakura. Under the accord, Nereus has agreed to leave the existing governmental infrastructure largely in place. In return, the Senate has agreed to voluntarily subordinate the Bakuran constitution to the Imperial charter.

"Our talks with Governor Nereus have proven to be quite constructive," said Orn Belden, the body's senior senator. "He would be perfectly within his rights to disband our body altogether and replace it with an Imperial committee. However, we were able to convince him we would all be better served if the current government were to continue operating." Belden noted that Nereus has promised Imperial aid for upgrading and streamlining Bakura's government and economy.

Nereus made this the centerpiece of his speech at the ceremony. "Contrary to mean-spirited rumors which have been circulating in past weeks, the Empire has not come to Bakura with some childish desire to run your affairs. Our primary goal is to build up and unify all Human worlds in one well-ordered union. To this end, we came to your world to see how we might serve you. We have already begun improving services and upgrading defense, a measure my good friend Blaine Harris will tell you is sorely needed." Nereus used the ceremony to announce the names of the first 4,000 Bakuran students to be awarded academic scholarships to prestigious Imperial universities under the SAGEducation program.

The accord seems to have put to rest rumors of revolution and riots, at least for the time being. "We have all suffered enough pain in the past few months," Belden said. "While we all have our doubts about the presence of the Empire on our world, it is time to realistically assess our current situation and try to see how we might best serve Bakura."

Colonial News Nets

To: Mon Mothma, Chief of State

From: Arhul Hextrophon, Executive Secretary and Master Historian, Alliance High Command

Security Status: Top Secret

Regarding: Report on Growth, Organization, Equipment, Activities and Objectives of the Rebellion.

Mon Mothma:

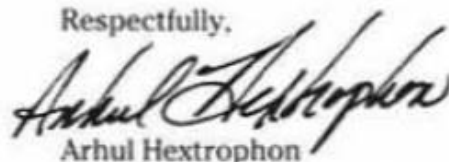
My office has completed the report you commissioned, compiling all known information concerning the Rebel Alliance from its earliest beginnings. In its entirety, the report is 168,000 DSUs in length and takes over 700 hours to read (assuming a rather high reading rate of one data screen unit per 15 seconds). Therefore, because we will be using the material to organize a briefing manual for incoming officers of the Alliance, I asked my most trusted assistant, Voren Na'al, to prepare a condensed summary of the report, which can be read in a much shorter time. I send you now the summary; if you wish a copy of the expanded version, one will of course be sent to you immediately.

Several notes concerning the report:

- The first section, concerning the birth and growth of the Alliance, is somewhat sketchy and incomplete. Due to the number of losses we suffered when Alderaan was destroyed, and the fact that you are one of the only people who has been with the Alliance since the beginning, we only had a small pool of sources to interview for background information. However, the intelligence and underground networks section is better documented.
- The remainder of the report, examining the military structure, vehicles, troop types, support services and recruitment and training of the Rebellion, is concise and complete. My researchers have spent thousands of hours inspecting first-hand reports from Alliance Army, Navy and Intelligence personnel to come up with the information contained herein.

In Conclusion: Considering the short time allotted for the creation of this report and the difficulty of contacting primary sources without lifting the veil of secrecy, our committee has done an exceptional job. Voren Na'al is a fine historian and I am sure the material contained in this report will be satisfactory for your needs.

Respectfully,



Arhul Hextrophon

*In the grave of Alderaan,
In the night of Charenthoth,
In the sands of Tatooine,
And the bloody hell of Hoth.*

*We will meet the enemy;
We will sound the battle-cry.
With our comrades at our sides,
We will fight and we will die.*

*Though they hunt us across space;
Though they kill us by the scores.
Though they crush our blessed home;
Though the mighty Death Star roars.*

*We will meet the enemy;
We will sound the battle-cry.
With our comrades at our sides;
We will fight and they will die.*

— Battle Chant of the
Legion of Alderaan.

Extract of Minutes from the 251st Meeting of the Alliance High Command

Chief of Staff: In reference to the discussion last week on the "Cobolt Offensive," StarCom: anything to report?

Chief of Starfighter Command: A conditional yes. We've got two wings of X- and Y-wings available during that time; Fleet Ops can give us another one; Sector Command says they can scrape up two more —

Chief of Sector Command: Probably. We've got the fighters who survived the Tocan system disaster recuperating in Ghorman; they'll be maybe 75% effective in two weeks. Plus, we can strip Tierfon, Homon and Farstey for the other wing, *if* the Imps hold off on their offensive in that region.

Chief of Staff: Intel?

Chief of Intelligence: According to my operatives, the Tierfon Sector Fleet isn't planning to launch their attack for three weeks — they too need to rest and refit after Tocan — but the new Fleet Admiral Tzenkens is supposedly a real firebrand: he might push the thing ahead to keep us hopping. I'd say there's maybe a 70% chance we've got our three weeks.

Seeing what we stand to gain — the new Imperial Scandoc decoding computer — 70% is good enough to go on ...

Starfighter Command: A week isn't much time to pull off Cobolt and then get set to parry whatever Tzenkens is up to ...

Support Services: If Fleet gives their approval, we can give you a couple of extra repair ships to hurry things along ...

Fleet: I see no problem there. We've got fleet maneuvers scheduled for that time; we can just cut down on starfighter operations until the repair ships get back.

Chief of Staff: OaS?

Chief of Ordnance and Supply: Fuel and weaponry are already assigned; awaiting pickup in deep space caches in Reegan system. Support has given us the necessary transports.

Chief of Staff: Good. Spec Forces?

General Madine, Special Forces Command: We've set up the liaison group with Sector Command; we're just waiting for up-to-date maps of the base from Intel. It's a risky operation and murder if we mess up, but I'm willing to take the shot if Starfighter Command is.

Chief of Staff: Anyone have anything to add? That's it, then. General Madine will take control of planning and operation of Cobolt from this point on. You will all assign officers to Madine's task force. General, I want daily progress reports.

General Madine: Yes sir.

Commander-in-Chief: Nicely done, gentlebeings. Chief of Staff, what is the next subject on the agenda?

Minutes of the Planning Meeting for Operation Cobolt

General Madine: Afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Cobolt is a hit-and-run operation. We're assaulting the Imperial orbital base above Mantooine in Atrivis sector after our starfighter wings draw off the TIE cover.

The raid has two objectives: first, steal the new Imperial Intelligence Scandoc coding computer on board the base; second destroy the base, covering the theft and, incidentally, stranding the TIEs in space. Your briefing chips contain the layout of the base, as well as our latest intelligence on troop complement, dispersion, and a psych profile of the commander of the base.

How do we get in?

Colonel Gharon: I'd say we use a variant on the "Erasmus" gambit. We insert 10 infiltrators aboard an Imperial supply craft. They disable the base's shields and as many guns as possible, and then hold up until relieved. I'll see what transport's got available and I'll get Intelligence to forge the orders.

Madine: Fine. But there are a lot of stormtroopers aboard; I'd go up to 20 men.

Gharom: Aye, aye, sir.

Madine: Colonel Seertay?

Seertay: If the shields are down, the marines can crack the cargo doors, no problem. One assault boat should do it — it will also serve to draw enemy fire, showing us which guns are still operable and must be taken out before the transport gets within range.

Madine: Good, Anna. Once inside the bay, set up a temporary airlock on the exit hatchways: we don't want to vent the base to vacuum — yet. How long will you need?

Seertay: I'll need at least five minutes to

clear out resistance and set the airlocks up ...

Madine: You've got three. Any longer gives the enemy too much time to regroup. Take as many techs as you need.

Seertay: Yes sir.

Madine: Fine. We're in. Toombs and Gideon, you will be in charge of the assault teams. Work up a team profile, based upon the transport capacity of a *Wolden*-class shuttle — remembering that you need to reserve space for the 20 infiltrators, though you can reasonably expect them to sustain 50 percent casualties. Also, our reports list 10 to 20 civilians on the base; we want to evacuate them if possible. Assume you've got no more than 20 minutes to complete the mission and get out.

First thoughts?

Colonel Toombs: That gives us room for about 75 troopers and maybe 1,000 kilos of equipment. It'll be tight. If we're wearing space suits, you can cut down our efficiency and speed by 18 percent. We need that airlock —

Seertay: You'll have it.

Toombs: — Good. I'll want three units of 25 soldiers each. One to hit the Intelligence Center, call it White Team, one to hit the power station, call it Black Team, and the third in reserve, call it Red Team. Figure 20 marines, two heavy weapons, two techs, and one med in each. We'll need a heavy repulsor sled and lift suit with White Team to move the computer. Gideon and I will requisition the men and equipment this afternoon.

Madine: Excellent. I want detailed operational profiles by this time tomorrow. We'll start training exercises in 48 hours. Let's roll.

General Madine's Report on Operation Cobolt

To: Commander in Chief, Alliance Forces
From: Commander, Alliance Special Forces
Regarding: Operation Cobolt

Commander Mothma:

Operation Cobolt commenced yesterday, 02500 hours, as scheduled. The infiltrators, posing as crew of an Imperial resupply ship, successfully docked at the base and began off-loading the dummy cargo.

The starfighter attack commenced at 02510 hours, engaging the enemy's picket and patrol craft, damaging or destroying at least three ships without sustaining any appreciable damage in return. The enemy scrambled its TIE fighters by 02512, at which point the starfighters began a fighting withdrawal, leading the TIEs several thousand kilometers from their base.

At 02514, the infiltrators attacked the security forces and successfully disengaged the shielding, the communications systems, and the gun positions. The assault shuttle impacted the cargo bay area by 02515; the area was secured and an airlock in position by 02519.

The transport arrived at 02521, two minutes behind schedule because of a navigational error in the hyperspace jump. The assault teams were disembarked by 02523; they began their attack at 02525.

White Team reached its objective, the Intelligence Center, by 02528, against negligible resistance. The scandoc decoding computer was loaded by 02536, one minute behind schedule. Resistance had stiffened as the Imperials began to get organized; Red Team was dispatched to their assistance. Remnants of both teams returned to the cargo bay at 02540.

Black Team reached the power station at 02531; the station was disabled by 02533. As they were completing their assignment, Black Team was attacked and overwhelmed by vastly superior numbers of enemy troops, the majority of them stormtroopers.

The marines at the cargo bay held the perimeter against mounting enemy pressure, attempting to give survivors a chance to escape. When the starfighter coordinator announced that the enemy's TIE fighters were on their way back to the base, our forces retreated to the assault shuttle and the transport, exiting the base at 02546. The ships entered hyperspace by 02550.

According to Intelligence reports, without power, the Imperial base entered Mantooine's atmosphere and broke up by 02740. It is unknown whether the Imperials discovered — or lived to report — the theft of the computer.

Our losses were as follows: 13 starfighters destroyed; all pilots missing and presumed dead. Four starfighters heavily damaged but hyperspace-worthy. One of the pilots, Commander Nin Nemb, badly wounded, heroically brought his damaged ship back to rendezvous point, but died before he could be treated. Sixty-eight soldiers missing, presumed dead — including the entire infiltrator team and all of Red Team — out of a force of 110 Special Forces troopers. I sorrow to report that Colonels Toombs and Seertay fell in the action; with your permission I will recommend them for posthumous promotion and commendation.

With respect,
General Madine
Commander,
Special Forces

"Hey, Troomis, what's shaking?"

Troomis straightened up slowly, carefully wiping the expression of fear and surprise from his face and replacing it with a look of dim-witted amiability. He turned to face the Imperial officer, ducking his head subserviently.

"Uh, hey, Cap'n Creeve. Nuttin' much; jest cleanin' the air intake dealies on this comm unit booster ... Uh, I've got my orders here somewhere ..."

He began digging hurriedly through a very large and very dirty pouch, scattering tools, greasy rags, and other unidentifiable objects across the floor, much to the Captain's disgusted amusement, before emerging triumphantly with a badly-dented, food-encrusted authorization chip.

He tried to hand the chip to Captain Creeve, who backed away from it hastily. Troomis's data chips were famous for their ability to clog up and ruin a good comp input. Other than that, the moron was okay: friendly, perfectly harmless and a tireless worker. After hours, he'd come around to

the Officers' Mess and shine shoes, clean bunks and do any other menial jobs for almost nothing.

That was one of the nice things about this posting: the locals were so poor that they'd do anything for a credit. A man could spread his pay pretty far, wide and deep around here, as the saying went.

Women were nice, too, though perhaps a trifle more spirited than absolutely required. Creeve rubbed a scar on his neck and chuckled, not noticing the look of raw hatred which crossed Troomis's face.

The Captain returned to business. "No need to see your authorization, little buddy. I can tell you're hard on the job. Keep up the good work." He turned to go, then turned back.

"Oh, and stop by my bunk when you're off duty, will you? Another 'surprise' inspection tomorrow; my quarters need cleaning."

Receiving Troomis's greedy nod in reply, Captain Creeve waved amiably and continued on his rounds.

The smile dropping off of his face as if it had never been there — as if the act of smiling was foreign to him and acutely painful — Troomis waited until the Captain was out of sight, then quickly knelt down and finished installing the recording device under the console.

Soon, he promised Creeve silently, soon the Alliance will strike, and the real war will start. Then I will drop this charade and continue the work that my sister began. Soon your "little buddy" will cut your head off and place it on her grave.

Captain Ioth, Analysis, Navy Supply, rubbed his eye blearily as he continued reading the data. The numbers flew up the screen far more rapidly than a Human could ever have assimilated, but Ioth did not miss a detail. He'd been at it for hours, looking for patterns, for aberrations, for some hint of the enemy's intentions. Ioth's species were naturals at this kind of work, able to digest numbers with the precision of a computer, and judge them with the creativity of a living being. The Empire lost a lot



Allen Nunis

when it dismissed aliens from important posts in the government.

loth was currently studying Imperial Navy supply requisitions for the past eight months. He didn't know where the Alliance had gotten the data; a bit squeamish, hating killing above all else, he didn't really want to know.

"Requisitions up 0.05 percent in Carrion sector ... trivial. Down 0.04 percent in Tierfon ... Hmm ... raised 4.1 in the Oplovis sector fleet ..."

He made a note and continued reading. Somebody else would decide if it meant anything.

Commander Zgorth'sth, Senior Officer, Intentions, drank another cup of gav as he worked his way through the reports. He was responsible for culling the data that his 15 subordinates had organized and marked as potentially important — a bureaucrat he was, separated from the real action by three layers of other bureaucrats, all sifting meaningless data for the "glory of the Alliance."

Hah.

Not a lot here today, but then there usually wasn't. Mostly, the job was dull and unrewarding: loads of effort for marginal results.

He wished he was out in the field again. He liked the cloak and dagger stuff, even if he did stick out like a sore thumb on most Imperial worlds. Still, there were places in the Outer Rim where his kind fit in and were practically invisible ...

Wait a bit.

Requisitions up 4.1 percent in Oplovis Fleet? Why did that ring a bell? He sat perfectly still for a long moment, shutting down his primary sensory apparatus while he dredged up the answer.

That's it.

He pounded rapidly on his terminal keyboard and retrieved operational records he had briefly scanned nine weeks previously.

Let's see. Eight months ago, Oplovis Fleet got drubbed by a line of battle from the Alliance Fleet in — where was it? — Yuvern system. Two months later, the Emperor's creature Vader visited Oplovis, "retiring" the unfortunate admiral in Vader's own inimitable fashion and placing a new admiral in charge. Since then, Oplovis has pretty much done nothing, staying within covering range of its base on Harrod's Planet. Now it requisitions an extra four percent supplies.

Think.

Two months for the new admiral to process the paperwork and take official control of the fleet; four months of maneuvers to shake down the men and the new command structure. Now Naval Command is beginning to get impatient and has prodded the fleet into action. So the admiral orders a bunch of extra supplies and gets ready to move.

The evidence was flimsy, but, in Zgorth'sth's



opinion, good enough to file a prelim report and maybe get some assets assigned to watch the fleet and see which way it jumped. He made a quick call on his comm unit and went back to the reports.

Alliance probe droid D-127X hummed and beeped contentedly to himself as he hovered on the edges of Oplovis sector, monitoring the Oplovis fleet's transmissions. He had a lot to do, for Oplovis fleet fairly flooded the communications frequencies with data — conversations over unshielded comm units within a ship, computer transmissions between ships, high-density coded bursts from the fleet flagship to the base on the planet below. Foolishly, the Imperial Navy refused to implement adequate communications discipline, expecting their "unbreakable" codes to shield them from Alliance interpretation.

D-127X didn't care about any of this, of course. He just did his job: recording as much of the information as possible and sending off weekly copies to Alliance HQ via slaved hyperspace probe droids. It had five of them when it first came to Oplovis and it was down to one. When that was gone, D-127X would be relieved by another droid while it returned to base to resupply.

Two days before he was scheduled to be relieved, D-127X noticed an Imperial vessel approaching his patrol area. His sensors identified the craft as a standard deep picket vessel; the Imperial fleet was beginning to cover its flanks. D-127X charted the craft's course and began to slowly move out of range. Suddenly, the picket accelerated, changing course to come directly at him.

D-127X weighed the odds. There was now a 99.001 percent chance that the ship had spotted

him. He was a surveillance droid, built for stealth, not for speed. He could not outrun the approaching vessel. His orders left him no options.

Deploying his last hyperspace probe droid — much faster than he was — to inform Alliance HQ of the situation, D-127X waited until the probe was safely away, beeped sadly three times, wiped his internal memory and self-destructed.

General Verman, Chief, Alliance Intelligence, was in bed, asleep, when his priority comm unit buzzed. Swearing, he rubbed his eyes and gulped down some water before acknowledging the call.

"This had better be good," he said by way of greeting.

"Evening, General! I trust I haven't disturbed your 'beauty sleep'?"

Commander Zgorth'sth's laugh boomed through the comm unit at Verman's obscene reply. Zgorth'sth was, as usual, entirely too cheerful. But a fine officer. Must get him back into the field soon.

Zgorth'sth was speaking. "Sir, a probe droid just came in. Our Oplovis surveillance droid self-destructed 12 hours ago; apparently the fleet has started putting out pickets."

"At this time of the night? Don't those Imperials have any consideration for a poor, hard-working general? Ah well. Notify Fleet Intelligence: looks like Oplovis is coming out to play. Tell Fleet I still think they are heading for Atrivis to smear the army on Mantooine. If they are following standard procedures, they'll be moving tomorrow. If Ackbar moves fast and gets to Mantooine first, he can pop 'em as they come out of hyperspace."

Precious minutes passed while Zgorth'sth translated the General's words into militaryspeak for encoding. When he was finished, he read it back.

He pounded rapidly on his terminal keyboard and retrieved operational records he had briefly scanned nine weeks previously.

Let's see. Eight months ago, Oplovis Fleet got drubbed by a line of battle from the Alliance Fleet in — where was it? — Yavern system. Two months later, the Emperor's creature Vader visited Oplovis, "retiring" the unfortunate admiral in Vader's own inimitable fashion and placing a new admiral in charge. Since then, Oplovis has pretty much done nothing, staying within covering range of its base on Harrod's Planet. Now it requisitions an extra four percent supplies.

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Two months for the new admiral to process the paperwork and take official control of the fleet; four months of maneuvers to shake down the men and the new command structure. Now Naval Command is beginning to get impatient and has prodded the fleet into action. So the admiral orders a bunch of extra supplies and gets ready to move.

The evidence was flimsy, but, in Zgorth'sth's

to the General to make sure it was correct. As usual, it was.

"Sounds good. Send it off by courier droid immediately. I'm going back to bed. Have somebody, preferably a Twi'lek dancing girl, wake me up in two hours."

Verman paused with his hand on the disconnect button, grinned maliciously, then continued. "Better make that four hours, Commander. If I don't get my full six hours of beauty sleep, I may end up as ugly as you, Ziggy."

"Verman out."

He hit the button before the outraged Zgorth'sth could think up a retort. Chuckling, he went back to bed.

Three days later, Oplovis Fleet was attacked by a battle line of three Alliance cruisers as it exited hyperspace in Atrivis system. Surprise was complete. Oplovis fleet was defeated with minimal Alliance casualties, and the army on Mantooine was saved.

The Role of Ground Forces

"Battle platforms can destroy, starfleets can blockade, but only the army can take and hold the ground. Without the ground, all your fancy space-ships will wither and rot."

— General Madine

"What's the matter? You guys wanna live forever? Move it out!"

— Unidentified Rebel Sergeant

Excerpts from an Orientation Meeting Given by General Madine to New Alliance Ground Commanders

"Greetings, gentlebeings. Today we are going to discuss the role of the ground forces in the Rebellion, with particular attention to small-unit and operational tactics and strategies.

"First, however, it is necessary to look at the overall strategic picture.

"Put up holo one, please."

A Comparison of Alliance and Imperial Forces

"As you can see, by the numbers, the picture is pretty bleak. The Empire's forces outnumber the Alliance forces by a factor of almost 30 to one in raw manpower, by better than 12 to one in equipment, and by about 15 to one in warships and transports. The numbers are equally grim when you compare weapons research, intelligence, and supplies.

"However, there are some extremely important mitigating factors which do much to offset these considerable disadvantages. First and foremost, we're the good guys and our forces are strictly volunteer. Every man, woman and alien joins our cause because they want to be here, not because some corrupt recruiting agent dragooned them into service. It is impossible to measure morale with the same accuracy as numbers of troopers, but, from the evidence, because we want to fight, we fight much better than they do.

"Second, the Imperials have a lot more to lose than we do because we control few cities and we have limited manufacturing capacity. We also don't have many training centers, and the ones we do have are well-hidden. The Imperials, on the other hand, have everything. They own the cities, the starship ports, the factories and the supply depots. And therefore, they are responsible for defending them.

"Of course, we realize that the value of this second point is rather debatable — claiming our

extreme poverty as an asset. And I, for one, would be happy to have even a quarter of their resources, even if it did mean that we had to defend them. However, it is indisputable that well over half of the Imperial troops in the galaxy are tied down defending their tremendous wealth. This leaves them inadequate forces with which to take the offensive, and that gives us the initiative. I'll take the initiative over equipment any day.

"Third and finally, we have the edge in leadership. Unquestionably. The Emperor is a ruthless despot, and he's cunning as hell. Vader is ... well, he's the most frightening being it has ever been my misfortune to meet. He's evil and smart. But the rest of the Imperials — the admirals, governors, Moffs and generals — for the most part, they're pure scum. They are data-pushers, bootlickers and sycophants, and far better at bureaucratic in-fighting and backstabbing than at command.

"On the other hand, our leaders — including you, gentlebeings — are brilliant, dedicated, energetic, and willing to take risks. You're not in it for the money nor do you crave the power for its own sake. If you wanted those things, you'd be working for the enemy now. You're in the war because you love freedom and hate oppression. You're in it because something deep inside you wouldn't let you sit by and watch your planets, your friends and your family, be trampled under the unfeeling jackboots of those butchers. You're in it because you'd rather die than submit.

"You, gentlebeings, are why we will win. Put up holo two, please."

Strategy

"We have discussed the relative strengths and weaknesses of Imperial and Alliance Forces. Now, we shall see how to use those to their best advantage in ground combat, maximizing our strengths and minimizing the enemy's."

Madine's Rules of War #1: Hit 'Em Where They Ain't

"Never attempt to match strength against strength with the enemy. He's probably got you outnumbered to begin with, and, because of his command of the sky and space, can call upon virtually unlimited reinforcements. You don't want to get into a slugging match with the Imperials: they'll win every time. If you can't achieve your objectives quickly, against little opposition, you probably can't achieve them at all.

"Speed and concentration are the keys. Bring all of your forces together and throw them against a fraction of his. Wipe 'em out quickly,

and then run like hell for the hills. If, once you have started an attack, you find out that your target is too tough for you, give it up. Do not keep up the fight past the breaking point; this loses lives and wins nothing."

Madine's Rule of War, #2: Attack the Enemy's Spirit

"The object of warfare is to destroy the enemy's will to resist. This is one of our strongest advantages because we fight for freedom and for our families; most of them fight for personal gain or because they've got a blaster at their backs. Our will to resist is—and *must be*—higher than theirs. Make sure that the enemy is aware of this.

"Make them fear you, gentle beings. Make them fear your troops' ferocity, cunning and unpredictability. In battle, there is nothing so frightening as knowing you face an enemy that has no fear and nothing to lose.

"If your opponent fears you, he'll make mistakes. Bad ones. He'll overreact to feints, and he'll retreat when he could hold on. Eventually, his army will disintegrate around him, becoming nothing more than a mob of frightened men. An army that is afraid *cannot* win. Ever."

Madine's Rules of War, #3: Use Your Brains

"You are our biggest advantage. You are not encumbered by out-of-date Academy training; you are not encumbered by fear of replacement if you screw up, and there is little chance of one of your subordinates deciding he wants your job enough to kill you for it. You can concentrate all of your energies upon the task at hand—victory. You can also afford to take chances. In fact, given the very real disadvantages under which you operate, you *have* to take chances."

"Do so.

"But do so in a smart manner. Keep one step ahead of the enemy. You and your troops have been specially trained to be flexible, to be smart, and to take advantage of any opportunity that arises.

"Learn how your enemy thinks. Though there are exceptions, most Imperial officers will do things 'by the book' because that's how they are trained, and most of those who are smart enough to have overcome their training have defected to us. The ones who are left tend to stick to what they have been taught. Learn their book, and you'll know what your enemy will do under any given circumstances.

"Present your enemy with the unexpected and try things that are not covered in his book. He may rise to the occasion and give you a

bloody nose, but, chances are, if forced to think on his own, he'll crack. And then you'll have him."

Tactics

"I am not prepared at this time to go into a detailed discussion of tactics with all of you because you have very different situations facing you. General Martin's command, for example, is a desert planet with a light population and virtually no heavy industry, while Lord Luaway's people live on an urbanized world, and, of course, General Throom's planet is entirely water-covered. After the program, the class will break up into smaller groups according to planet-type, political situation and Imperial opposition. My assistants will discuss tactics with you then.

"There are, however, a few general tactical doctrines which are applicable to virtually all situations everywhere. We shall begin with the defensive, and then move to the offensive.

"Put up the next holo, please."

The Mobile Defense

"Under most circumstances, you will not be defending a specific point or line with the hope of holding onto it. As discussed above, the enemy can almost always eventually bring overwhelming force to bear against you. You usually go on the defensive because you haven't got enough power to attack, or to buy time for your soldiers, supply trains and headquarters units to retreat and escape.

"Here, as in all of your military endeavors, do not match your strength against the enemy's. Hit him where he is weak, make him attack you where you are strong. Give up ground when necessary; the enemy's forward progress may give you the opportunity to launch a devastating counterattack.

"Following is a classic defensive technique which will illustrate the point. The diagrams are taken from an After Action Report filed by General Rieekan after the Battle of Tiems.

"General Rieekan's forces had successfully attacked the city of Tiems, destroying a power station and liberating several thousand Rebels incarcerated there. The Alliance transports scheduled to take his forces off-planet were delayed by enemy starfighter action; he had to defend the landing zone area from a heavy counterattack by Imperial ground troopers until the transports could arrive."

The Battle of Tiems

"After the trap was sprung, the Imperial forces retreated in disorder to Tiems to regroup and

await reinforcements. The reinforcements, an entire division of native troops, arrived 24 hours later, but the Imperials delayed their attack another 12 hours while waiting for the weather to clear up enough to allow them to call on air support from a nearby base. By the time they launched their attack, the Alliance forces were safely off-planet.

"These are the lessons of Tlems: first, General Rieekan knew his enemy. Imperial tactical doctrine requires commanders to '... concentrate the maximum force against the weakest part of the enemy's line. Such attacks are likely to gain the highest benefits for the smallest cost.' Rieekan knew that the weakest part of his line was its center; he had good reason to expect the Imperials to attack there.

"Similarly, he knew that, in the event they scored a breakthrough, the Imperials were likely to follow up hard and fast, attempting to get into the Alliance forces' rear areas, cutting them off from retreat so that they could be destroyed in detail. With knowledge of how his opposing commander's mind worked, he was able to tailor a trap that the enemy would find virtually irresistible.

"The second lesson of Tlems: training pays off. The Alliance troops performed brilliantly. The battalions on the left and right flank held their own against twice their number for over two hours, allowing time for the trap to develop. The battalions in the center put up a strong show of resistance to the main attack, taking

tremendous casualties, and then, when the time was right, pulled out and fell back to the town in good order. This maneuver could only have been performed by highly-trained, highly-motivated, and well-led troops; others would have almost certainly disintegrated.

"The final lesson of Tlems is this: you don't have to annihilate an enemy to beat him. The Imperials started out the campaign with four regiments. They lost two regiments in the battle. Shortly thereafter, they were reinforced by a full division of four more, giving them a total of six. The Alliance began the campaign with three regiments. They used up most of a regiment in the execution of the trap, leaving them two in any shape for further combat. Thus, when the battle opened, the Imperials had four regiments facing three. After they were reinforced, they had six regiments facing two. By all rights, the Alliance Forces should have been overwhelmed in short order. Instead, the Imperial commander delayed his attack until he had air support — which was too late.

"Rieekan had beaten the enemy commander's spirit. By Rieekan's brilliant tactics and his troopers' flawless execution of those tactics, he had made his enemy doubt himself and his troops. The Imperial general did not attack — *at three to one odds* — because *he* was whipped.

"Whip your enemy, gentlebeings. Make him *fear* you and your soldiers. A frightened enemy is often of more use to us than a dead one.

"This concludes today's lecture. My associates will organize you into smaller groups for further discussion.

"Thank you."

"... the development and mass production of droids has proven invaluable to all spacelaring cultures, and made possible great strides in science, engineering, and exploration, benefitting countless millions.

"The primary purpose of the droid is to take on the tasks their creators cannot, or will not, do. It is the droid who explores the trackless wastes on planets with fierce methane winds that would prove fatal to many species; it is the droid who plunges into malfunctioning nuclear furnaces to effect repairs; it is the droid who lifts and carries the precious cargo that fills thousands of container ships; it is the droid who has brought to a myriad of species the freedom to focus on that which is truly important, secure in the knowledge that the menial tasks, the dangerous tasks and the labors that keep our societies moving forward will be accomplished."

— Anton Saar, Of Droids and Men

Cloak and Data

To: Channe Dar, Alliance Intelligence, Gaulus Sector

From: Mehar Grot, Commander, Alliance Base #16

Subject: Espionage

Sir,

I regret to inform you of our recent discovery that an espionage droid has been operating within the confines of our base on Gaulus.

The droid, which, according to the records, was purchased from Jawa traders four months ago on Tatooine, was believed to be a standard 3PO protocol droid. It has been present at a number of strategy meetings, serving as interpreter between the Gaulians and ourselves. We now believe that these meetings and this base have been compromised, and must assume the Empire is aware of all plans regarding this sector.

We first learned of the security breach two days ago, when our communications center picked up a tight-beam broadcast in Imperial code emanating from inside the base. We immediately triangulated to discover the source of the beam, and discovered it was coming from the quarters of my second-in-command, to whom the protocol droid was assigned. When we entered these quarters, we found only the droid present.

The droid denied knowledge of any mes-

sage. Our techs ran a systems check on it, and it came up clean, but a second, more extensive check turned up the hidden programming and transmitting equipment characteristic of espionage droids. When confronted, the droid appeared to be completely bewildered, and subsequent memory disassembly proved that the droid was in fact ignorant of its secondary programming.

This incident could well prove to be a disaster for Gaulus and the Alliance. I have already communicated with my superiors, requesting that the base be evacuated in anticipation of the Imperial attack that is sure to come, now that our location and defenses are known to the Empire. But we both know that we cannot evacuate an entire planet, and the natives of Gaulus will be made to pay for their cooperation with us.

This is an unfortunate situation which should never have been allowed to occur. I realize that Intelligence has a great many things to handle, but it was my understanding that greater care was to be taken in examining droids, particularly those acquired from questionable sources such as the Jawas. The espionage droid problem is rapidly becoming a serious threat, and greater precautions must be taken when purchasing droids in the future.

End transmission.

Dining with Droids

Kredo Daar let his eyes feast on the sight before him — his first meal in a week that hadn't come out of a plasti-pak. He let the sweet aroma of the meat — he wasn't even sure what kind it was — float up his nostrils, and his mouth began to water as he dug his fork in ...

"Excuse me, sir."

It was said in the quiet, perfectly-modulated tones of a droid. Specifically, it was the SE4 that had served him the meal, which was now standing over him and shaking its metallic head.

"What is it?"

"I'm terribly sorry to interrupt your meal, sir, but you see ... you're eating with the wrong utensil," the droid said.

The words didn't register with Daar for a moment. *No, I must have been on that ship too long ...*

"What are you talking about?" Daar said slowly, letting a hint of menace creep into his voice. Meanwhile, his food was growing cold.

"That fork, sir — it's for your salad, you see, and it shouldn't be used for consuming red meat. It's not done, sir."

"Of course it's done!" Daar snapped, gesturing toward the meat. "Hell, it's practically burnt!"

"And the gravy, sir, you're letting it spill all over the table. Here, let me wipe that up," the droid said, reaching out a to rub the table with a damp cloth.

Daar found himself reaching for his blaster. "Somebody get this crazy droid away from me!" he shouted.

Another pilot ambled over and gently led the droid away. "Take it easy, Kredo. The last SE4 we had got blasted because somebody didn't like the food. This was the only other one around, and it hasn't been memory-wiped yet. It's not used to dealing with such rough customers."

Daar grumbled a little bit as he watched the other diners explaining to the droid that there wasn't any salad to begin with, so it didn't matter what fork was used. He turned back to his food, now stone cold, and looked at the fork in his hand, then the one on the table.

He looked from one to the other for a very long time.

REBEL ALLIANCE SOUREBOOK: ALLIANCE BASES VIGNETTE

Imperial Commander Harles, commanding Garrison Company 125a, walked around the late Alliance base on Gaulus, figuring out how to set up his men to protect the techs who were going to be dissecting the base to learn what they could about the Rebels.

As he walked, Harles idly wondered how Intell had discovered the base's location. Probably an informer; it usually was. In any event, the Rebels had not had time enough to destroy the base before they were overwhelmed. Harles bet they had found time to wipe the computer, though. They always did.

Courageous bastards. You had to give them that. Though not out loud, he reminded himself. He'd already been reprimanded once for that. Lost him any chance at a promotion, he'd figured.

Gaulus base was dug from the living rock, hidden high up in one of the planet's forbidding mountain ranges. His men were camped on the slopes outside. Access to the base was via hangar bay, the first area Harles examined.

Amazing. It looked as if it had been hand-dug, blasted from the rock with laser-beams and explosives. Made sense: fusion cutters would project an electromagnetic signal visible half-way around the world. Still, must have been a hell of a job.

The bay contained a couple of flights of starfighters. Most had taken some surface damage in the fighting but otherwise looked relatively intact. X-wings. The techs will love to get their hands on those babies; they've been playing merry hell with our TIEs. There also were a couple of dozen land- and airspeeders scattered around; local transport, nothing special. Maybe he could requisition two or three for surface patrols.

Hmm. No tractor beam generators. Guess you had to fly in here manually. Wouldn't enjoy that very much in the kind of weather you get up in these mountains. He wondered if his transport officers could manage it without getting themselves killed.

Harles stepped over a few bodies and headed down a hall into an area marked "Medical Suite." More bodies. Looks as if the wounded fought to the

death. Typical Rebel heroics; they don't know when to give up.

He turned to leave, paused, then bent to examine one body more closely. Officer. Woman. Pretty, too, or would be except for the damage a blaster shot had done.

Harles felt a vague regret. He hated a war in which you fought women. Something dirty about it. Though they were usually tougher and smarter than the men, come to think of it.

The officer moaned feebly. She's still alive! Harles pulled his comlink to call for a medic. Then he paused. They'll heal her, then Intell will peel her mind like a tockberry. Then they'll kill her. He grimaced and decided to let her die in peace.

Leaving her there, Harles went into an office area. More bodies. Non-combatants, by the looks of them. They'd died fighting too, though. The area looked as if it had been thoroughly ransacked; he wondered if the Rebels had done it before they left or the Imperial assault troops had after they'd taken the place.

He checked Life Support. It looked intact. Good. Save us the trouble of bringing in heating units.

Living quarters. More dead Rebels. Gods, some were just kids. A couple looked as if they'd been mutilated after they died. A soldier's vengeance against people who fought to the death for something they believed in. Harles sighed. He was getting too old for this.

Harles moved into the Command Center. Blaster holes in the computer banks. Just what he'd expected. Blood everywhere. More dead kids. How many was that now? 20? 30?

He rubbed his knuckles roughly across his mouth. Stop thinking, he commanded himself. Stop thinking and do your damn job.

He heard a noise coming from a hallway on the opposite side of the room. Probably a tech or a trooper looking for loot; still, he drew his blaster and went to check it out.

The Rebel had her back to him. She was doing something to the main power generator. Sensing his presence, she spun around.

Harles pointed his blaster at her. Their eyes

locked. Hers showed no fear, only hate.

She was all of 16.

Harles swallowed. He remembered the carnage in the hallways, all the blood. What his people did to children like these. He began to shake.

It was too much.

Dropping his blaster to his side, he jerked his head at the generator. "Finish it," he said in a harsh voice.

Looking at him first with distrust, then with something like wonder, the Rebel turned back to the generator. She worked quickly. In a few moments the generator began to whine, and red lights flashed on monitors. She nodded at him. "Three minutes," she said.

Harles activated his comlink. "Harles here. Code black! Main generator on overload. Detonation in 60 seconds. Will try to dump it. Evacuate base and perimeter immediately." He deactivated the comlink, cutting off the communications officer's startled reply.

Far away, he heard warning klaxons sound. His men, pulling back.

He turned to the Rebel. "You got a way out of here?" She nodded, and headed down toward the office area. She worked at a wall-panel, pulling it off, revealing a narrow corridor. She headed down the corridor at a trot. Harles began to follow, paused, cursed, then turned back to the base. The girl stopped and made as if to follow him.

"Keep moving," he called over his shoulder. "Got something to do. I'll catch up with you if I can." The Rebel knew how to follow orders. She left without a word.

The girl ran a long way down the corridor, through a blast door to a larger cavernous area, where a repulsorcraft waited. She started up the repulsorcraft, moved it out of direct sight of the blast door, and stopped.

A long minute passed.

A loud, dull "whuuuummp" sounded, shaking the mountain. Dust and rocks fell on the repulsorcraft and the girl. The lights in the cavern died. Switching on the vehicle's lights, the girl turned it to leave.

Then the blast door opened. Out stumbled Harles, carrying the wounded Rebel officer. His uniform and hair were burning. But his body had protected the woman from the blast.

Helping Harles and her mother into the repulsorcraft, the girl drove off into the darkness. For the first time since the attack, she allowed herself to weep.

Rebel Alliance Sourcebook: Support Services Vignette

Laser fire, laid down by artillery and spacecraft, tore through the night air like lightning as the medic crouched in the ditch and worked on the wounded. When she first arrived, the smell of mud and fear and blood had nearly overwhelmed her, but she didn't notice it any more. She still flinched at the laser fire, though. She just couldn't seem to get used to that.

"This one's patched up enough to move, I guess," she said to an aide. "Get him out of here."

The aide and an orderly gently lifted the man onto a stretcher and carried him to a waiting repulsorcraft 500 meters behind her position. They couldn't bring the craft any closer; there was no cover and the artillery would have murdered them.

The medic had been there for three days while the Alliance forces held off the Imperials' offensive, slapping on medpacs until they ran out, bandaging wounds, amputating limbs which were too far gone for reconstruction, and getting the injured in shape for the dangerous trip back to the aid station.

She didn't feel tired any more, she had stopped feeling tired some time yesterday — she had gotten to a place beyond tiredness, a place where there was only the wounded, only their pain, only her devotion to the cause.

The medic washed the blood off of her hands and moved dully to the next patient. She smelt burned meat — blaster wound. The soldier made a sucking sound when she breathed — pierced lung. The medic mechanically inserted a drain and a plug, bandaged the whole thing into place, and motioned for the orderlies to remove her. She gave the soldier perhaps a one in three chance of survival.

Up ahead, toward the front lines, she heard shouting and blaster fire. Heavy. Another attack. The medic didn't even look up. Maybe they'd hold; maybe not. Not her business.

Four days ago, when she came here, there had been three other medics with her. One had fallen within the first hour; another had died that night;

the third was badly injured this morning. They had all trained together; she had been engaged to Kral. She didn't know if he was still alive. Now it was just her. She couldn't even weep; she couldn't seem to care. She swayed a bit, rubbed her eyes, and moved on to the next patient.

Someone touched her arm. She looked up into the face of Lieutenant Reese, in charge of this sector of the field.

The Lieutenant spoke. "Ma'am, the enemy's broken through; we're retreating."

She nodded. "I'll need fifteen minutes to get the injured ready to travel —"

The Lieutenant was shaking his head. "No ma'am. You leave now. In five minutes this place will be crawling with Imperial assault vehicles. If you aren't out in two minutes, you won't get out."

For the first time, the medic heard the panic hovering in the Lieutenant's voice. Around them, soldiers were stumbling back through their position — the retreat was in imminent danger of becoming a rout.

The medic nodded sharply. "Two minutes. Aye sir."

The Lieutenant left without a reply and rushed toward the front, or what was left of it, to attempt to rally his men. The medic called to her orderlies.

"We're getting out of here! All equipment is to be abandoned; you are to assist the walking wounded to the rear. Make all of those too injured to walk as comfortable as possible; we haven't got time to save them. You've got two minutes — move!"

The orderlies were on their way, running to their tasks even before she completed the instructions — they were no strangers to retreat. The medic herself was moving in under a minute, half-carrying a blinded flashburn victim to the rear, when she came across Kral.

Her fiancée was lying on a stretcher, pale, heavily-bandaged. He smiled at her. "Go get 'em, kid," he whispered.

The medic stopped, horrified, the blind soldier at her side forgotten. "I can't leave you!" she cried.

"You damn well can," he replied. "I'm gut-shot. Can't walk; you can't spare the men to carry me. I'll be fine," he lied. "I've got a painkiller; I'll survive until the Imps come and get me. We'll meet after the war. Now move out soldier, before you're overrun."

The medic looked down at him, then looked up at the young man standing by her side. At last, she nodded. She kissed him goodbye, then stumbled off with the wounded soldier.

Once she left, Kral sagged back into his stretcher, finally letting the agony show on his face. He had a painkiller; hadn't used it yet though.

He thought about his fiancée to take his mind off the pain. She was a great girl, and a fine soldier, too. He loved her very much; pity he would never see her again. Still, it was enough to get a chance to say goodbye — most didn't.

He listened: the sounds of firing were getting closer. Good. The enemy would be here in a couple of minutes. Fine. He hurt. A lot.

When the first Imperial soldier came, Kral smiled up at him. Then he pulled the pin on the grenade hidden under his blanket. The painkiller was extremely effective.

Rebel Alliance Sourcebook: Afterword

To: Arhul Hextrophon
From: Mon Mothma
Security Status: Top Secret
Regarding: Your magnificent report on the Rebellion

My dear friend:

I thank you and your office for your brilliant efforts in compiling this report. With few words, you have described our struggle in a way that takes my breath away, showing the great courage and determination of the free peoples of the galaxy for all to see.

You, Arhul, know how little I have to do with this Rebellion, and how much I owe to others, famed and unknown, living and dead. This great struggle is a people's struggle: a struggle between the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor, the cruel and the gentle. You have shown our struggle to everyone, and for that, I thank you. You have created a legacy for our children, so that, even if we fall, they too shall know.

As you (and few others!) know, I am not sanguine about the outcome of our Rebellion. We have hurt the Empire — and badly — at Yavin, and our organization is growing stronger everywhere. But the Emperor grows stronger, too. Sometimes, when I cannot sleep, I can feel him out there in the night, brooding over his evil, feeding on the very life of the galaxy. He is terrible — malignant, cunning, and so strong! I fear him! I do not know if I have the power to beat him; I do not know if anyone can.

In my dreams, I see a young man — a boy, really — fighting the Emperor and Vader. He's alone, and in such pain! Somehow, I know that all of our efforts ride on his thin shoulders, and against those two, he cannot stand! He cannot! I wake from those dreams shaken, and very afraid.

Ah well. What will be will be. We will continue the fight, and, if mortal beings can, we will win. And if not — what did you tell me, so long ago, when it all began? You said, "If we fall, the galaxy will tremble at our passing." I've always liked that.

And if we fall, the galaxy will tremble at our passing!

The Force be with you, my friend.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mon Mothma', with a stylized, flowing script.

Mon Mothma

Organa Says Empire Destroyed Dentaal Unspecified Node

This week, Princess Leia Organa recorded a holo vid for distribution to Rebel cells throughout the Empire. AEN passes on excerpts from that speech pertaining to the Dentaal disaster with no further comment.

"... It was with sadness and horror that I watched Dentaal enter its final hours. Like many, I cheered its brave defiance of Imperial rule, and yet knew with a sick dread what the outcome of such public resistance must inevitably be. I was not, therefore, greatly surprised to discover Dentaal perishing shortly after it declared independence. Whatever the Imperial propaganda machines on the NewsNets might claim, I have no doubts that the plague which ravaged Dentaal was of Imperial origin.

"... The Empire now admits that it destroyed Alderaan, after denying responsibility for months. Whatever noble reasons Palpatine might claim as his justification for destroying Alderaan (and I can tell you they were neither noble, nor Palpatine's, nor justifiable), the bald fact remains that the Empire did do the deed, by its own admission. And having once tasted the depraved delights of shattering an entire civilization at one stroke, it hardly seems surprising that Palpatine should feel the desire to do so again.

"As one might expect, I was less than pleased to see the blame for the holocaust visited upon Dentaal placed at the feet of my world and my House. However, I am comforted with the assurance that the truth of Imperial culpability must in the end emerge, as it did in the case of Alderaan. Indeed, I am happy to report that Alliance intelligence sources are very close to determining the true source of the Candorian plague cultures. A full report will be released within a few weeks through normal Alliance channels, and a synopsis of the report will be released through pro-Alliance NewsNets."

Alderaan Expatriate Network

Imperial Forces Quell Amma Riot

Amma, Bacrana

Imperial forces quickly subdued a large riot today in Amma's Central Sector. Under the command of Moff Ramier, military forces met thousands of "demonstrators" in Central Sector Square and ordered them to disperse. Although the "demonstration" was promoted as a peaceful protest against "oppressive" Imperial decrees, the crowd responded with explosives and blaster fire. Stormtroopers and Imperial Army troops easily routed the attackers, with no losses of their own. The crowd quickly scattered and fled, though sporadic fighting continued for hours afterwards.

Amma has been put under martial law. Moff Ramier released this statement: "Further demonstrations will not be tolerated. Those responsible will be punished. In order to insure their safety, all citizens are ordered to remain at their homes and lodgings until this crisis has passed. Curfews and restrictions will be transmitted to all NewsNets and comm stations immediately following this broadcast."

Imperial sources indicate that the leaders of the demonstration have been captured, but the search continues for collaborators and participants. Hundreds of arrests have been reported. There are also widespread rumors of Rebel agents organizing the "demonstration." If true, today's riot would be the Rebellion's first attack in Brak Sector.

Brak Sector News

Amma Deception Revealed

Invisible Node

Now that you've heard the official version, we bet you want to know what *really* happened in Amma, right? So here it is, right when you need it! (What would you do without us?)

Actually, our friends at BSN aren't too far off this time. (Someone must have distracted the Imperial censor.) There was a demonstration in Amma. Thousands of people of all species showed up and marched through the city, all under the banners of peaceful protest and calls for reinstatement of lost rights. (Our particular wish is an uncensored press, could you tell?)

The Empire joined this party with a few hundred of their troops and armored walkers. Apparently, Moff Raimer doesn't want citizens marching around his capital while his troops are on parade (with good reason, his troops don't march nearly as well). Anyway, when the crowd was ordered to go home, some of them went crazy and shot up a few stormtroopers. Must have been the radicals up front, all 40 of them. Impatient fools. The Imperials routed the protestors, all right. A few dozen squads and walkers against a few thousand unarmed, frightened civilians. A few hundred injured or killed, no one knows for sure. Now we have martial law and a few hundred false arrests.

Throughout all of this, did anyone notice who was missing? We did. The Bacrana System Defence Force was nowhere to be found. Kind of strange. You would think that the local police forces would be ordered to aid the Imperials in "crowd control." Guess what? They were so ordered. Seemed that General Reskan didn't want to shoot up his own people, so he ordered the BSDF to pull out. It took a bit for the Imperials to notice, and by the time they did, he was gone. We think we'll see him again, someday.

Finally, this was no Rebel action. The Rebels are much more organized, less public, and have more effective methods. This was way too public for Rebel tastes, for reasons that should now be obvious. That's it for now.

Armistice Announced in CSA-Trianii War

Knanan, Fibuli

After three years of bitter fighting in the Tingel Arm of the Corporate Sector Authority, the border war between the CSA and the Trianii Colonies has ceased — at least for the moment.

Trianii and CSA delegations are meeting for a series of talks here on Fibuli, once the site of a major Trianii colony, and now a wasted neutral land after three years of fighting. The armistice was declared after seven months of delicate negotiations between diplomats on both sides of the conflict.

The war has been fought to a bloody stalemate along a chain of systems settled by the Trianii and later claimed by the CSA as property ceded to it in its corporate charter with the Empire. Both sides have invested tremendous resources in the conflict. “The Trianii’s basic goal has been to make our taking their land more trouble than its worth,” said Halbreck Dodd, one of the CSA negotiators. “They have certainly succeeded, but at a horrible price. Fully a third of their young have been consumed and destroyed in this jyhada. I suspect both sides are ready to come to some sort of accommodation.”

Ceenda Bekkar, the Trianii chief negotiator, agreed. “We do not fight out of natural aggression, but out of a deep-seated sense of self-preservation. Remove the cause of conflict, and the hostilities will cease.” Both sides have signaled they would be willing to compromise.

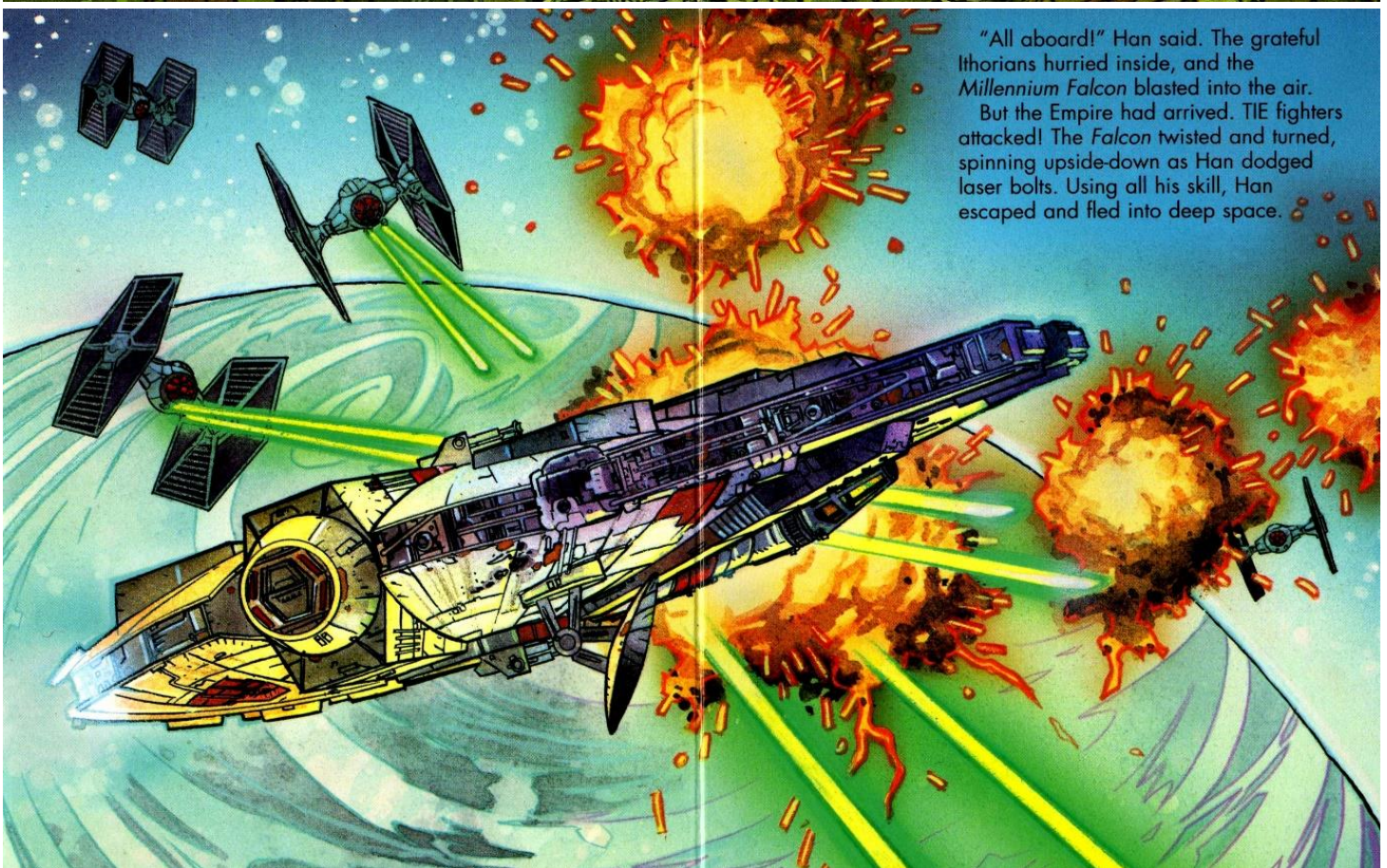
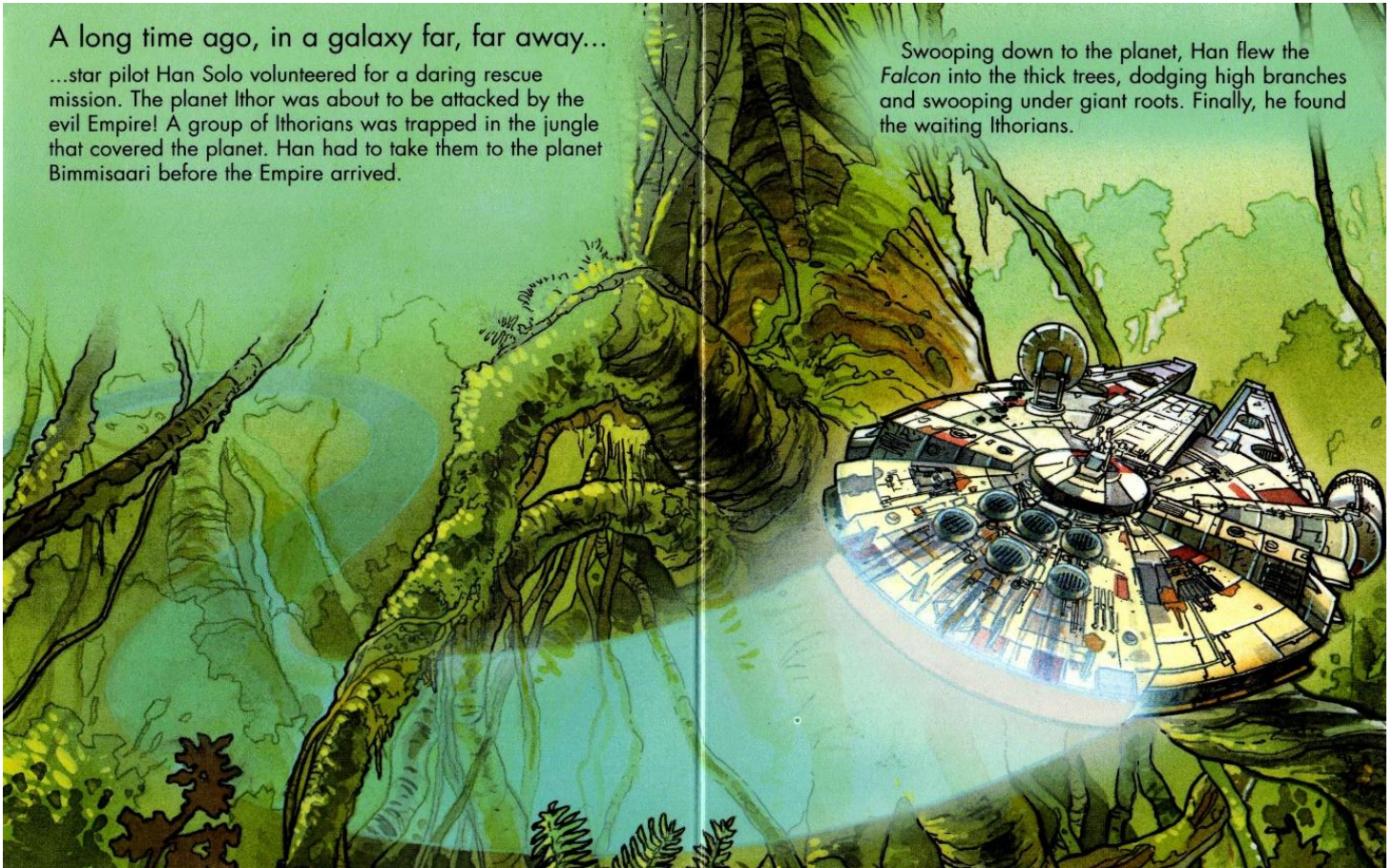
The talks have not moved beyond the opening statements, making it difficult to gauge the likelihood of success, but there is a feeling of optimism about the chamber which makes one hopeful that the time for blood has been overtaken by the time for words.

Han Solo's Rescue Mission

A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away...

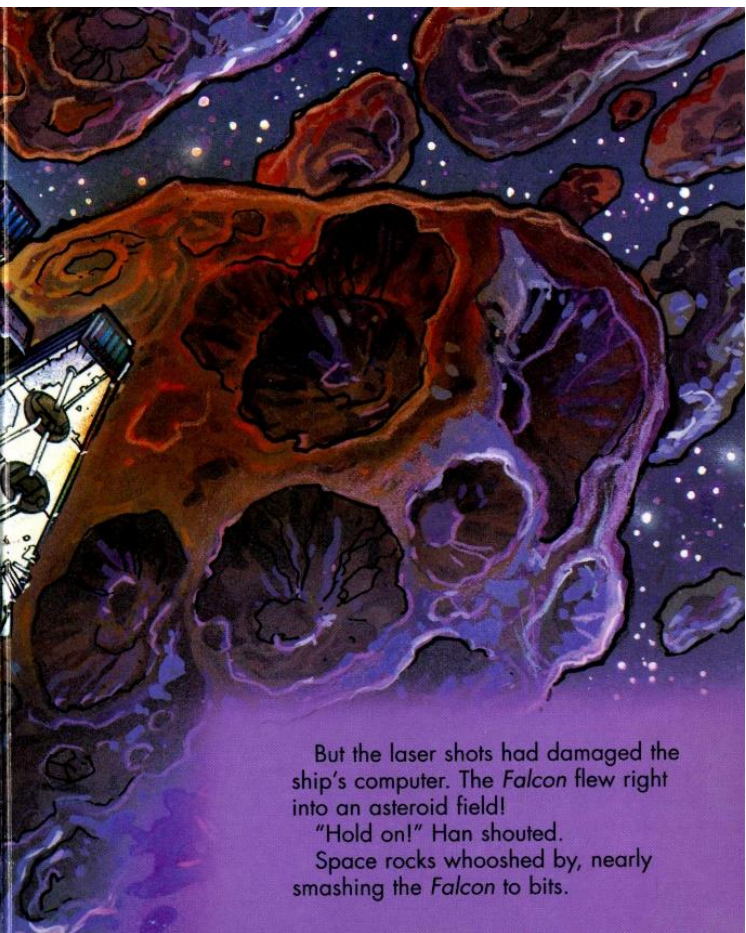
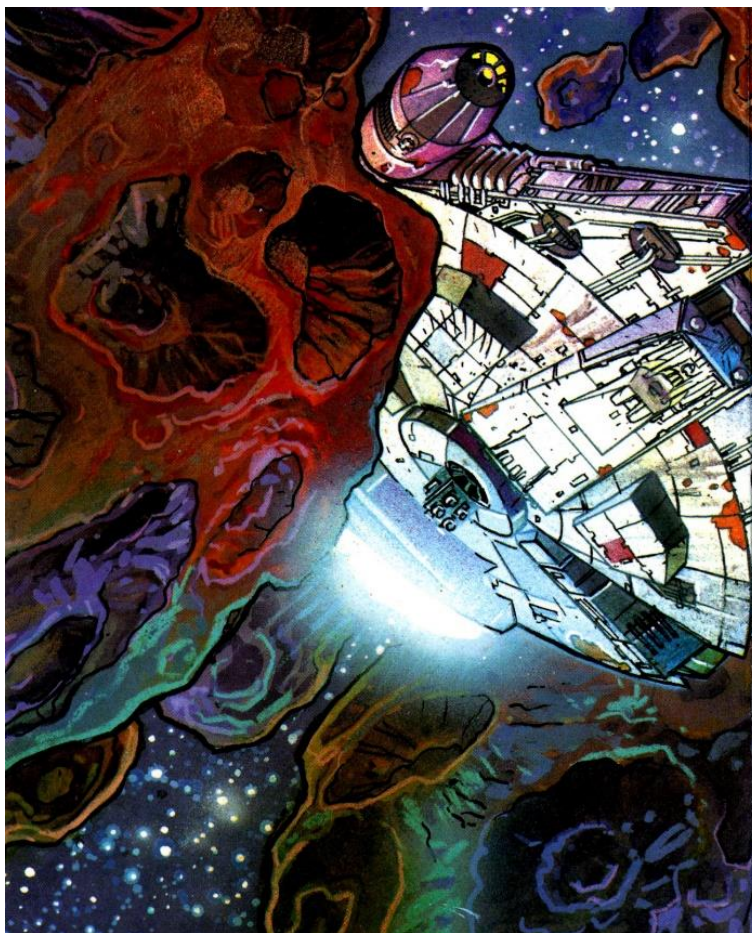
...star pilot Han Solo volunteered for a daring rescue mission. The planet Ithor was about to be attacked by the evil Empire! A group of Ithorians was trapped in the jungle that covered the planet. Han had to take them to the planet Bimmisaari before the Empire arrived.

Swooping down to the planet, Han flew the *Falcon* into the thick trees, dodging high branches and swooping under giant roots. Finally, he found the waiting Ithorians.



"All aboard!" Han said. The grateful Ithorians hurried inside, and the *Millennium Falcon* blasted into the air.

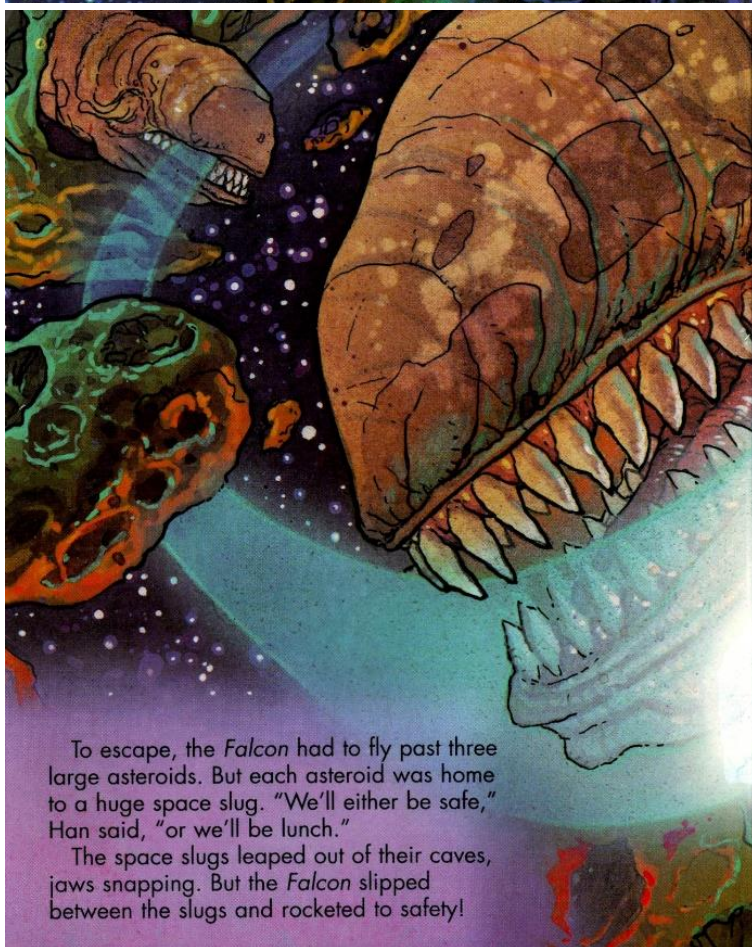
But the Empire had arrived. TIE fighters attacked! The *Falcon* twisted and turned, spinning upside-down as Han dodged laser bolts. Using all his skill, Han escaped and fled into deep space.



But the laser shots had damaged the ship's computer. The *Falcon* flew right into an asteroid field!

"Hold on!" Han shouted.

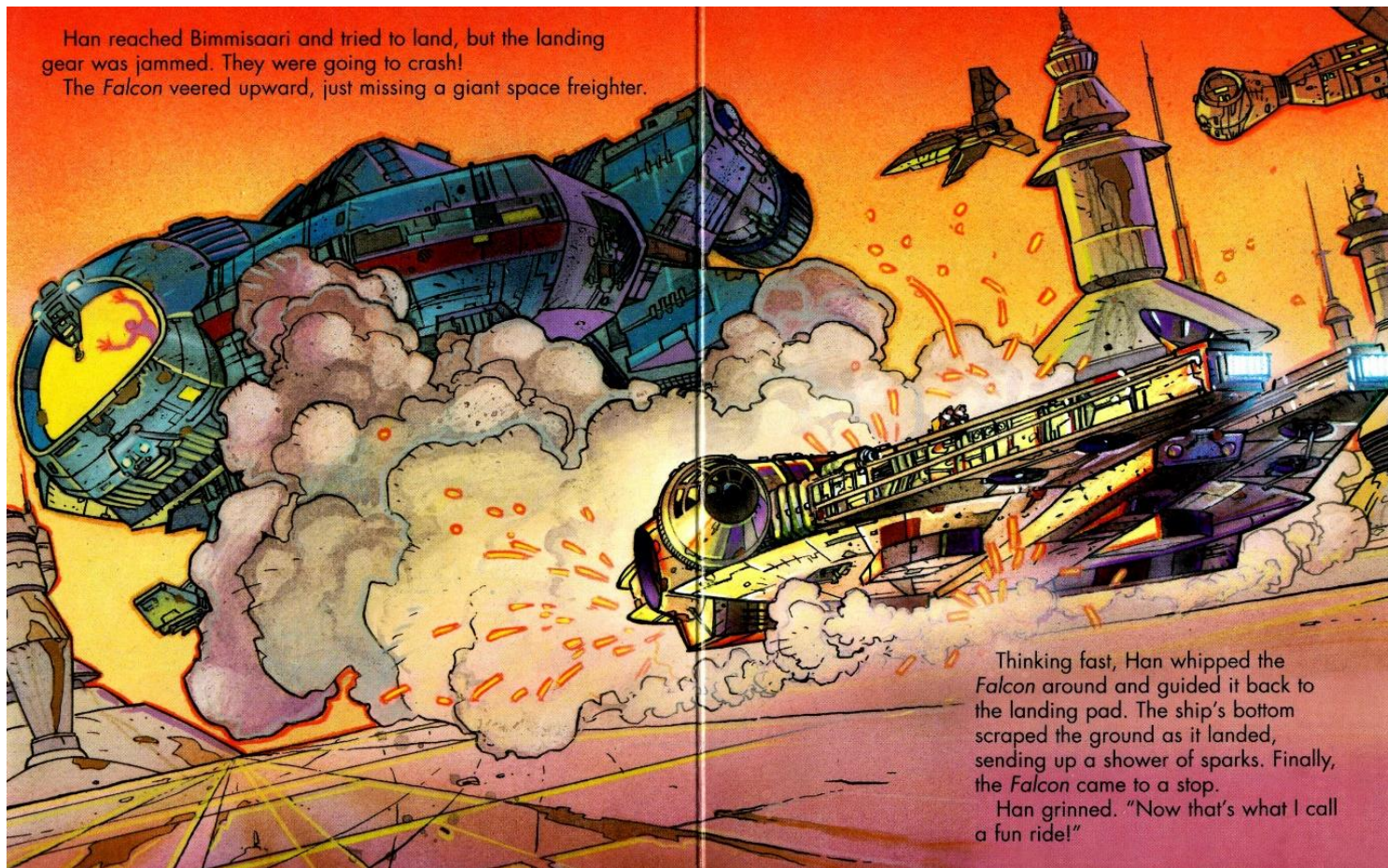
Space rocks whooshed by, nearly smashing the *Falcon* to bits.



To escape, the *Falcon* had to fly past three large asteroids. But each asteroid was home to a huge space slug. "We'll either be safe," Han said, "or we'll be lunch."

The space slugs leaped out of their caves, jaws snapping. But the *Falcon* slipped between the slugs and rocketed to safety!

Han reached Bimmisaari and tried to land, but the landing gear was jammed. They were going to crash!
The *Falcon* veered upward, just missing a giant space freighter.



Thinking fast, Han whipped the *Falcon* around and guided it back to the landing pad. The ship's bottom scraped the ground as it landed, sending up a shower of sparks. Finally, the *Falcon* came to a stop.

Han grinned. "Now that's what I call a fun ride!"

36:6:26/CYN/NAR.4.SHD/TRD

Mid-Rim Experiencing RawMat Shortage

Nar Shaddaa Node

According to several industry experts of our acquaintance who do not wish to be named, raw materials essential to the production of capital starships are becoming increasingly scarce, especially in the Mid-Rim region. Doonium is especially hard hit, and rawmat purchasers are now snapping up every shipment of the stuff they can find.

Our experts attribute the shortage to a number of factors, among them increased Imperial orders (which of course take priority over private sector orders), the crippling of key production centers by Rebel factions, and a gradual decline in Mid-Rim production which has been in progress for decades.

Most of the Imperial transports are standard charters bound for shipyards like Tallaan and Kuat, but a great many are non-charter military vessels assigned to the Imperial Energy Systems subministry. Where they are going is anyone's guess, since they have not been seen entering any known Imperial ports. Possibly they are bound for the Galactic Core.

At any rate, traders with an inside track on doonium, hybrid plexisteel, and other strategic raw materials should move quickly to pick them up and park them somewhere, since they will be doubling in value within the next quarter.

Cynabar's InfoNet

36:7:8/COT/ERB2/ CLA.7.CRT/ECO

Gowix HQ Pulling out of Corellia

Coronet, Corellia

After 300 years on Corellia, Gowix Computers, which produces a variety of computers for industrial and consumer use, is transferring its corporate charter from Corellia to Corulag. "We've been contemplating the move for quite some time," said Gohn Danfeil, CEO of Gowix. "For the past few years, it has grown ever more difficult to maintain our shipping schedules with less actual traffic passing through the Corellia sector. Our own freighters have of course been shipping our materials and products, but we can't control the shipping infrastructure, and to be perfectly frank, the Coronet Space Port has entered a rapid decline, to say nothing of the spaceports elsewhere in the sector." Danfeil went on to announce the location of the new corporate headquarters on Corulag.

Gowix's defection is just the latest of many businesses leaving the system, as pirate attacks and an unstable economy take their toll. There was no comment from the offices of the Moff or Diktat on this latest loss of revenue.

Corellia Times, Basic Edition

36:7:16/CYN/NAR.4.SHD/TRD

Cynabar's Infonet Shutting Down

Nar Shaddaa Node

Hi, folks. We just got word here at the big CYN that some major Imperial heat is about ready to fall on our little heads. Whatever we said, it must have been pretty major, because there are three ISDs currently in orbit around Nar Shaddaa, with an Interdictor thrown in for good measure. Subtle, Palpy.

Not that we're worried, since the big CYN ain't nowhere near Little Slugland (node IDs notwithstanding). Nonetheless, it appears the Cynabar crew is now officially hot. Too hot, we suspect, for business as usual. So, it is vacation time for your faithful CYN gang. This may be too hot for even Hallomar, though, so don't look for us there, beachbums.

We'll be back. We think. Stay tuned, spacers, and take care out there!

Cynabar's InfoNet

Empire Shows Flag at Nar Shaddaa

Corellian Sector, Nar Shaddaa

Imperial forces, consisting of three Imperial Star Destroyers and an Interdictor cruiser, took up orbit around Nar Shaddaa yesterday. Lord Triege, the commander of the flotilla, refused to comment on the reasons for the Imperial visit, the first Nar Shaddaa and Nal Hutta have seen in years.

The Imperial forces spent the afternoon downloading troopers into the Corellian Sector and the surrounding urban areas, and commenced a block-to-block search, which lasted through the night and continues this morning. The troopers are equipped with transponder dishes and crosslink beam emitters, and appear to be scanning the local radio and hypercomm traffic for a specific radio signature beam. It is not yet clear who or what the Imperials are looking for, though it is apparent they haven't found it yet.

No blockade has been declared at this point, though ships are permitted to leave the moon only after they have submitted to a thorough search. Curiously, the customs inspectors have not shown a great deal of interest in obviously illegal cargoes, though a few fugitives who are listed in the *Imperial Enforcement DataCore* have been arrested.

Understandably, the Imperial activity has the locals in a high state of alarm. Nar Shaddaa has long been seen as a world engaged in questionable activities the Empire frowns upon, but the Empire has never before shown much official interest in it. The sudden turning of the blinding light of Imperial scrutiny onto this unsavory world has sent its denizens darting down every spundark hole they can find.

Smebba Dunk, the current head of the Clan Council, vigorously protested Triege's actions early this morning in a broadcast from his estates. "We cannot let this gross violation of Hutt space pass without comment," he said through an interpreter. "Nal Hutta and the Empire have long held to a policy of non-interference in one another's affairs, and it pains the Hutt people to see the agreement violated without so much as a by-your-leave. We request an immediate explanation." Thus far there has been no such explanation.

Galaxy News Service

Emperor Appoints New Governor to Chandrila

Imperial City, Coruscant

In a ceremony in the Candreal Gardens Center in Imperial City, Emperor Palpatine announced the appointment of Gerald Weizel as Governor of Chandrila. Weizel will be replacing Governor Grandon Holleck, who tendered his resignation early last week.

Weizel is former Governor of Dakshee in the Colonies, where he came to the attention of the Imperial Court due to his handling of the Brella Temior crisis. "Weizel has a certain flair for handling problem worlds," according to Amier Candle, department head of the Imperial University's School of Public Policy. "Like the Dakshee affair. Who would have guessed the union heads were JAN ringleaders? But Weizel sniffed them out, and resolved the issue without bloodshed. He has the savvy to hold his own with Chandrila's formidable political personalities, and obviously, Coruscant hopes he has what it takes to bring Chandrila further into the Imperial fold."

Greng Tabbe of the Imperial Public Policy Foundation agrees. "I don't think we'll be seeing any of the weak vacillation and chronic self-doubt we saw in Holleck. Weizel has a track record for forging ties with political leaders in potentially unfriendly territory."

In his resignation letter to the Emperor, Holleck cited failing health and a desire to leave Chandrila for his native Ganthel as his reasons for retirement.

Coruscant Daily NewsFeed

Tariffs Lifted on Gladiator Walkers

Unspecified Mid Core Node

In the past, the sport of gladiator walker combat has not enjoyed the wide-spread popularity in the Colonies and beyond that it has in the Core. The units, which must be manufactured in the Core in accordance with Imperial security regulations, come with a huge transport tariff attached. No longer.

While exhibition teams have been formed on some worlds, until now the high cost of the walkers has inhibited the growth of feeder teams and minor leagues. Only the grass-roots leagues can generate a talent pool the exhibition teams can use.

With the lifting of the export tariff, the barriers to the formation of such leagues has vanished overnight. Speculators anticipate a huge boom in the gladiator walker market, and investors are busy founding teams and signing team players.

What no one has actually done yet is buy a walker. This will change within days, however. Mainstream shippers are already loading their supercargo haulers with scores of zZipp and Galladinium units bound for the Colonies, and independent trading co-ops are likewise pooling resources to enter the new market.

Even so, there is a narrow window a sharp spacer may be able to exploit. It is not likely that an independent spacer will land the major contracts, but she may be able to sell a few demo models before the market is flooded. Haldeen and Barma sectors are expected to yield the best ROIs until the megacorps nail down the long term contracts.

Independent Traders' Infonet

Rebels on Esseles Shut Down Power

Calamar, Esseles

Early today during the morning rush hour, Calamar experienced a near-total blackout, plunging the city into chaos. The power was shut down at the Calamar Power Plant when the plant computer received a direct order to shut down the Calamar grid. The computer claims the order followed proper protocols, and bore the authorization key code of the mayor's office. The identity of the person giving the order has not yet been established.

This might be seen as an isolated but malicious prank if it were not for the fact that the blackout occurred at precisely the same time law-enforcement authorities were closing in on a cell of Rebel terrorists in the state university. Officials now suspect the blackout was a related incident, since it permitted the Rebels to escape.

It is not currently known who might have shut down the city's power grid, or how he or she might have obtained the mayor's key codes. It has been speculated that there are Rebel spies in the mayor's office, and Governor Takel has formed an investigation committee to look into the matter at Moff Graffe's urging.

Darpa SectorNet

Jante and Freda Feud Erupts

Reynols, Jante

For decades Jante and Freda miners have been arguing about the mining rights to the Rettna system, which lies squarely between them. But until now, the clashes have been relatively peaceful ones, consisting of fist fights, minor sabotage, and an occasional death out in the Rettna system.

This week, however, saw a deadly escalation in the war over resources, as news spread that the Mid-Rim shortage was driving prices up on rawmats throughout the region. A Jante frigate fired several shots at a group of Freda mining craft which were operating on what Jante Materials Corporation representatives claim was Jante territory, destroying two ships and disabling the third. The following day, several Freda patrol lighters destroyed a Jante mining camp which had been the source of several disputes.

Both sides are now massing their hyperspace-capable defence forces in separate areas of the Rettna system, and tensions are running at an all-time high. Mediators from both systems and Moff Havaland's office have been attempting to defuse the situation before the crisis breaks out into armed conflict, but the negotiators have made little progress thus far, and Havaland is threatening to send in an Imperial arbiter if a peaceful resolution is not forthcoming. Three Imperial ships have been dispatched to keep an eye on events at Rettna.

Imperial HoloVision

Tigellinus' Star Rising in Imperial Court

Imperial City, Coruscant

Grand Admiral Rufaan Tigellinus is increasingly being seen as a force to be reckoned with in the Emperor's Court. He has forged a formidable faction in the short time he has spent on Coruscant, having established alliances with several key Imperial Advisors, including Alec Pradeux, who is known to have the Emperor's ear.

Tigellinus moved several steps closer to the center of power last month when he gained Moff Jamson Caglio's support in backing Tigellinus' protégé, Gerald Weizel, for the post of governor on Chandrila. Caglio's defection from Grand Moff Traeda's faction is seen by Court observers as a significant event, since Caglio has long been a solid supporter of Traeda, and an influential champion of his policies.

Tigellinus is currently rumored to be courting Moff Disra. Disra, who has been out of favor with the Emperor for some time, nonetheless has many friends in Traeda's faction. Disra has not yet given any indication whether he is seriously considering Tigellinus' offers.

By Alendar Jarvis, *New Order Progressive*

Tombat Sacks 'Secure' Resort

Elshandruu City, Elshandruu Pica

The Elshandruu Pican resort hotel *Margrath's* has joined the august ranks of several dozen high-security resorts which have been plundered by the intergalactic jewel thief known only as the Tombat.

The establishment opened its security vaults for business this morning to discover that the valuable jewelry stored within had been replaced with a blue quella stone, the trademark of a Tombat heist. Altogether, the Tombat spirited away gems and settings valued at over six million credits, including a stunning necklace of three corusca stones in a mythra setting, the property of Lady Landric of Danteel, itself valued at over two million credits.

Kina Margrath, the proprietor of *Margrath's*, is visibly upset at the theft, though she refuses to comment on the heist. The heist may well have permanently stained *Margrath's* sterling reputation as a highly-secure business resort where wealthy patrons might show off and store their valuable jewelry without any worries — a reputation built up over several generations.

Perhaps more worrisome for Margrath is the news that Lady Landric, the wife of a Core Worlds Moff, has announced that a full-scale Imperial investigation at the site of the theft will be launched within a few days.

Colonial News Nets

Tombat Returns Gems — 'Unheard of!'

Elshandruu City, Elshandruu Pica

The news that the Tombat had successfully looted the Elshandruu Pican resort hotel *Margrath's* two days ago was certainly unexpected, but not, perhaps, altogether surprising, given the hotel's high profile. That the Corellian thief left no evidence for the investigating team to work with was not shocking, either. After all, he's had years of practice doing just that.

What utterly floored idle spectators and experienced investigators alike was the news that, as of this morning, the jewels, to a stone, have mysteriously reappeared in the same vault from which they vanished, together with another quella stone!

Observers are baffled by this unprecedented action. "We have to assume that the Tombat just changed his mind about this heist," said Inspector Toorka. "Why, we don't know. It's unheard of." Toorka was unwilling to accept the hypothesis that another thief might have returned the goods. "That's a rather large leap. It's difficult enough, and rather embarrassing, to believe that the Tombat had a change of heart and replaced the jewels while both bypassing Margrath's security systems *and* our still-ongoing investigation team. To believe that an equally talented thief happened by, and outwitted both the Tombat and the security systems takes a lot more faith than I have."

NovaNetwork

JAN Leader Executed After Extradition Fight

Camele, Haldeen

Yesterday morning, two months after being sentenced to death by an Imperial court, Earnst Kamiel, a ringleader and founder of Findris's most violent anti-Empire underground group, was lead before a Colonial firing squad and shot.

Kamiel was found guilty by the Colonial Imperial court system over two months ago, and sentenced to death by firing squad. In most capital punishment cases, the sentence is carried out almost immediately. However, there was a two-month delay in the execution of Kamiel because so many systems were clamoring to carry out the sentence in their own capitals.

At the time of his arrest on Elrood, Kamiel had the death penalty in 54 systems. Each of these 54 systems desired to have Kamiel transported to their own capital for execution. After several weeks of arbitrating a settlement, Moff Gandril finally ordered the execution to take place on Haldeen itself. As a final gesture to the injured systems, he allowed each system to contribute one marksman to the firing squad.

Kamiel was one of the founding members of the Justice Action Network, a terrorist group of radicals formed to destroy the Imperial infrastructure. The group was born on Findris 16 years ago, and has now spread to over a hundred worlds in the Colonies, according to Imperial crimewatch experts. JAN has claimed responsibility for the bombings of thousands of civil authority buildings throughout the Colonies, and is thought to be responsible for over 10,000 deaths. As one of the three founders of this organization, Kamiel was charged with being personally responsible for 3,000 of these deaths.

Colonial News Nets

Cynabar's True Identity Revealed!

Camalon, Trantor

The rogue newsnet operator known only as Cynabar has long been a thorn in the Empire's side. This person has for years successfully protected his or her identity and eluded the best bounty hunters and Imperial investigators the Empire has to offer.

However, your humble TRI correspondent has managed to obtain proof positive that Cynabar is none other than the infamous smuggler Platt Okeefe! By careful analysis of the syntax used in both the writings of Okeefe and Cynabar, my droid V1-CH has determined a near-perfect match between the two. Moreover, it is a known fact that Platt Okeefe dropped from sight at the same moment that the Empire chased Cynabar off Nar Shaddaa. The clincher, of course, is that the name "Cynabar," when translated into Ithorian and printed out in the Huttese character system, looks very much like "Plttke" when viewed sideways, which can readily be extrapolated into Cynabar's true name, Platt Okeefe.

Clever, Platt, but there is one man who is just too clever for you! As responsible citizens of the Empire, we at TRI have reported our findings to the Imperial Office of Criminal Investigation. Unfortunately, the officials I spoke with failed to appreciate the damning evidence V1-CH and I have uncovered. Though the IOCI has since shown little sign of pursuing my lead, rest assured that your tireless correspondent will stay on the case until the bitter end!

By Andor Javin, TriNebulon News

Rawmat Recession Threatens Ralle's Coalition

Camalar, Esseles

President Ralle's dominance of Esselian politics has weathered many threats over the decades, but none have truly posed as serious a threat as the current challenge by Esselian New Order party leader Jamson Freller. As the local Esselian economy falters in the wake of the Core recession set in motion by the Mid-Rim rawmat shortage, the New Order Party is making major inroads in Ralle's coalition with the Cardeans, and even with members of Ralle's own Forad Party.

Ralle, though revered for his role in leading Esseles through the Clone Wars years ago, is fast aging and his support among voters has increasingly become split among ENO and Cardean candidates. With Hall elections coming up, Freller is capitalizing on the economic downturn by targeting Ralle's policy of allowing aliens to hold strategic manufacturing jobs on Esseles, a policy held on few other Core worlds (Corellia and Brentaal being two major exceptions).

"It was acceptable, up to a point, to allow Esseles' alien population to contribute to the production of our goods and services," Freller said today in an interview on Damatal Holonews. "However, with unemployment among the Human population rising, it becomes less tenable to allow outsiders to hold jobs that should rightfully belong to the sons and daughters of the Esselian Empire. If the Esselian New Order party is given the majority in the Hall, I assure you that Esseles will weather this recession and come out of it far better than our fellow sector worlds."

By Deena Mipps, Darpa SectorNet

IOCI Assigns Investigator to Tombat Case

Landru City, Danteeel

At the behest of Moff Landric of Emmo sector, the Imperial Office of Criminal Investigation has assigned a Special Enforcement Officer to bring the art thief known only as the Tombat to justice. IOCI Director Jacen Corbit introduced the officer, Inspector Zanza Gata, to a packed room of reporters in a press conference today.

"When the decision came down to get the IOCI involved in the Tombat case," Corbit said, "we didn't have much trouble in finding the right officer for the job. Inspector Gata has made something of a hobby in tracking the exploits of this Tombat character. His uncannily accurate reading of the Tombat's psych profile have become something of a legend around the Office. We hope his zeal for the case will drive him to apprehend the Tombat in short order."

Gata's speech was short and to the point. "As the Director indicated, I have a great interest in the Tombat case, and am delighted that I am able to devote my full resources to tracking down the Tombat and bringing him to justice. I will not rest until the Tombat is brought before an Imperial court to answer for his crimes!" With that stirring speech, Gata strode from the room, ignoring all further questions by the media mobbing the halls outside.

In all candor, we at TriNebulon News could scarcely have hoped for a more dramatic development in the Tombat case. Gata is an extremely capable officer with years of experience bringing crime syndicate leaders, assassins, and slicers to justice. His success rate is nearly 84 percent, and he is known to go days without rest when tracking his prey. That he has taken a personal interest in the Tombat case spells certain trouble for our favorite thief.

TriNebulon News

2 ABY

37:F1:1/CDN/G76D/COR.1.IPC/ENT

New Year Fete Week Launched in Imperial City

Imperial City, Coruscant

The festivities of New Year Fete Week have been officially launched here in Imperial City with the traditional Shaldania Parade. Thousands of floats, bands, and military regiments processed among the spires of the Entertainment Center. Even the threat of rain could not keep away the millions who gathered to watch from the plaza, balconies, and the viewglobes hovering over the street.

The first thundering display consisted of an armored division of Imperial walkers from the Imperial Star Destroyer *Vanguard*. The walkers set the pace for the parade, and following presentations

were hard-pressed to top them. In terms of sheer beauty, the Flandorian flower floats were a definite highlight, and the tamed herd of giant lumbering wombacks from Parada made a definite impression on the crowd. Interspersed among the cultural presentations were more displays of Imperial might, including celebrated units from every branch of the Imperial military.

This marks the first Shaldania Parade in eight years which the Emperor has not attended. According to his publicity office, the Emperor is attending to Imperial business in the Deep Core, and was unable to return to the Palace in time for Fete Week. His absence also meant the absence of his elite Palace Guards — the celebrants had to do without the stunning presentation of arms by the guards which traditionally opens the festivities.

Grand Admiral Tigellinus, Grand Moff Traeda, Moff Jaan, and a number of Imperial officers were on hand to officiate in the Emperor's absence.

Coruscant Daily NewsFeed

Reprinted From Imperial Center Today:

By Eschul Shaywa

The Zhell and the Taungs have been powerful names here on Imperial Center nearly as long as civilization has existed on our planet — and that's an awfully long time. Their names adorn ancient neighborhoods that claim some connection to long-ago battles, as well as new developments whose builders want a patina of tradition for their durasteel and clari-crystalline palaces.

But how much do you really know about these ancient warriors? Talk to scholars, and they tell you the only thing clear about the Zhell and the Taungs is just how unclear their histories are. But that isn't to say we know nothing: Researchers on several worlds are working tirelessly to knit together scraps of legend and bits plucked from archaeological discoveries, in hopes of one day reconstructing the ancient chronicles.

The outlines of what happened some 200,000 years ago are known to every schoolchild: The 13 nations that made up the Battalions of Zhell spent centuries clashing with the forces of the Taungs. During one of their skirmishes, a volcanic eruption destroyed the city of Zhell, shattering the Battalions' power. The assembled Taungs watched in awe as ash blotted out the sun and rained down upon them. Taking their opponents' destruction as a sign of divine favor, the Taungs christened themselves Dha Werda Verda, the Shadow Warriors, and celebrated their victory in the epic poem of the same name.

In its entirety, *Dha Werda Verda* encompasses more than 700 verses divided into 11 chapters and written in the language known as Notron Cant, whose subtleties continue to defy translation. But most people know only a fraction of the ninth — the 10 verses popularly known as "The Maker Comes to Unmake." No matter what school, junior academy or crèche you belonged to, if you're Coruscanti you either memorized the strange syllables of these 10 verses for recitation or had a schoolmate who did.

But there's something odd about our veneration of an ancient epic, notes University of Byblos historian Mesh Burzon.

"We believe the Zhell were humans — perhaps the original human population that took to the stars when Imperial Center was known as Notron," Burzon says. "The Taungs were not human. If the account of the destruction of Zhell is even vaguely accurate, it was a monumental disaster for humanity. So what you have is the descendents of those who survived a near-extinction reciting the poem their oppressors composed to celebrate the event."

As Burzon explains, the Zhell nations were battered by the loss of their capital, but not broken: They recovered and drove the Taungs off Notron entirely. The Taungs emigrated to the Outer Rim and eventually settled Mandalore, named for a legendary clan leader. From this new homeworld they became the scourge of the Republic, routinely raiding its outlying worlds and sometimes penetrating the very Core.

The Mandalorian clans valued loyalty to their ferocious warrior code above all else, a quality that would eventually transform their society. A later leader, Mandalore the Ultimate, admitted humans and other species to the Mandalorian ranks. As it turned out, Mandalore the Ultimate was the final Taung to lead the clans.

“The Taungs are now extinct, but their ways have been preserved by the Mandalorians — a human culture, ironically enough,” Burzon notes.

Hu Jibwe, scholar of military history at the Salmagodro Grand Academy, notes that there is another song popularly known as “Dha Werda Verda” — the Mando’a war chant known as “Rage of the Shadow Warriors.” During the Clone Wars, some Mandalorian trainers taught this chant to their clones, and it became a hallmark of those units. It’s rarely performed today, so if you have a chance to see it, take advantage: The chant and ritual dance are mesmerizing, particularly if the dancers follow Mandalorian tradition and drum out the rhythm on the chest or back of those next to them:

The ash of the Taung beats strong within the Mandalorians’ heart.

We are the rage of the Warriors of the Shadow,

The first noble sons of Mandalore.

Let all those who stand before us light the night sky in flame.

Our vengeance burns brighter still.

The gauntlet of Mandalore strikes without mercy.

We are the rage of the Warriors of the Shadow,

The first noble sons of Mandalore.

Let all those who stand before us light the night sky in flame.

Our vengeance burns brighter still.

But as Hu notes, “Rage” is far more recent than *Dha Werda Verda*. The best-preserved record of the Taung epic poem, written in Notron Cant and housed in the Baobab Archives on distant Manda, contains none of the verses of “Rage.”

“It’s my belief that ‘Rage of the Shadow Warriors’ dates from the reign of Mandalore the Ultimate, when the Taungs knew they were being eclipsed,” Hu explains. “I’ve always

thought it a poignant work — a plea that the Taungs not be forgotten by the newborn culture they knew would outlive them.”

But what of the warriors on both sides whose valor is remembered in *Dha Werda Verda*? Of them we know almost nothing, academics say.

“Two hundred thousand years is an almost unfathomable amount of time,” says Arhul Manaxa, scholar emeritus at the University of Rudrig. “Not even the histories of the Columi date back that far. There is no agreement whatsoever about the site of Zhell, when exactly the battle took place, or if it even did. All has been buried — by kilometers of city and eons of time.”

Manaxa notes that many scholars have struggled to explain how the Taungs could have emigrated from Imperial Center to the Outer Rim after their defeat.

“We know of no species able to travel through hyperspace 200,000 years ago,” Manaxa says. “This leaves us with a few different possible explanations, none of which can be proven or disproven. Perhaps the Taungs were capable of faster-than-light travel, and invaded Imperial Center. Or perhaps the Taungs were native to Coruscant, and the Zhell were the invaders. Perhaps the dates are wrong, and the conflict in fact took place far later, when the Core was being explored by the eldest species of the galaxy. Or perhaps it never happened at all.”

Nor, says Hu, can we say anything about the Battalions of Zhell, or the Taung legions that confronted them.

“When enthusiasts stage recreations of the battle they tend to use replica great axes and swords known from the excavation of Taung burial sites on Roon,” he says. “But by the time the Taungs reached Roon these were ritual objects — species capable of traveling through hyperspace don’t still rely on edged weapons. Nor do you find such weapons still used by societies as sophisticated as the Zhell nations. It’s as if you staged a recreation of the Siege of Ramsir with the Imperial Army limited to parade sabers.”

Hu says he knows it may be unromantic to imagine the confrontation at Zhell occurring between armies that possessed aircraft and atomic weapons. But he urges us to look deeper and examine the qualities of *Dha Werda Verda* that have kept the poem alive for eons.

“All we have is a poem, but *what* a poem!” he says. “The image of the Maker appearing to unmake the world has inspired artists for as long as artists have existed. The mere names of the generals awaken something within us: What schoolchild hasn’t felt his heart race at the mention of Rexutu the Unconquerable or Olhak the Reaver, or mourned the inevitable downfall of the mighty and noble Doom of Ulmarah?”

In case the words of academics don't stir you, let me close with a more personal story. I recently attended a performance of "Rage of the Shadow Warriors" alongside Swart Swifto, who served as a trainer for the Grand Army of the Republic and later the Imperial Center Guard.

After the final shouted *dralshy'a* died away, I told Swifto about the latest academic thinking about the Zhell, the Taungs and *Dha Werda Verda*. I was curious to see what this veteran defender of Imperial Center would think about the irony of a Taung war poem giving rise to a Mandalorian tradition, and that tradition in turn being passed on by Imperial Center's guardians.

Swifto shook his head impatiently at me.

"I hear what you're saying, Miss Shaywa, but none of that is important," he said. "It doesn't matter that the poem was composed by some Taung, or that Taung wanted to kill an ancestor of ours, or what weapon he wanted to do it with or what language he spoke. The Taungs and the Zhell were enemies, but they were also part of a brotherhood, one that includes all living beings who believe in a higher cause and are willing to fight and die for it. If you've been in battle, if you've entrusted your life to other soldiers who are just as scared and confused and noble and brave as you are, then you're a part of that brotherhood. No matter what you look like."



FELLOW REBELS IN THE FIELD:

I've been told that a lot of you are familiar with my exploits and that you consider me something of a legend. I don't see why you should. Every one of you are heroes, and some day your stories will be legendary as well. Your membership in the Alliance shows that you have tremendous bravery, conviction, and character.

However, I do have a few years on most of you. Rebel HQ thought it would be advantageous if I passed on some of my field experience.

The Rebel Alliance, of course, does not have the resources and funds to go shopping for supplies. Sometimes it receives new equipment or donations from systems or corporations that have thrown their loyalty to the cause, and for that the Alliance is grateful, but for the most part troops make do with what is at hand.

This datafile was written with this understanding. What few supplies the Alliance has must be carefully doled out to major operations. This datafile is for those of you who pave the way for the major offensives by getting behind Imperial blockades, making diplomatic contacts with beleaguered star systems, running covert operations to obtain documents, and other important missions.

In short, this datafile is for the Rebel on the go who doesn't have much backing him up.

The information herein depends on a familiarity with technology. We live in an age of technological marvels — and dangers. You must all become familiar with the way things work. It is not enough that machines do tasks for you, for with that attitude you are imprisoned by the abilities of the machinery. You must be able to make the machine do what you need it to do. If

you can't handle technology, you're no better than a Throg-bellied, soft-spined, blue-haired Angroosh who doesn't stand a chance in the Alliance the minute things get rough.

Technology, however, can be seductive. Over my lifetime I've seen a proliferation of cybernetic enhancements in black market trade. Too many people, especially the youngsters, want to get an edge over the universe with electronic implants. While a prosthetic to replace a lost organ or limb is a valid choice, the desire to rebuild your body simply to be better. . . I don't think I need to spell this out, but you're giving up part of *yourself* when you do that. And you can't give up yourself without paying a steep price.

I've included some of the cybernetic packages in this volume so that you're aware of what's out there — not so you'll run out and buy one. You should know that there still exists a great prejudice in the galaxy against cyborgs. To be part machine is to earn the distrust of almost everyone you run into. From what I've seen of what happens to people who start to rely on these machines, the mistrust is well founded.

I also want you all to think about the importance of information. The new kids coming up think this war is all about zipping around in under-armored starfighters. The real battle is fought with information! How do they think the Alliance won the battle of Yavin? Skywalker wouldn't have been able to do Bantha poot with his X-wing if he hadn't gotten those plans to the Rebellion!

Anyway, these are the random recollections of a man who spent a great deal of time making it up as he went along. I pray that you find the same success that I did.

May the Force be with You,
General Airen Cracken

To: Fellow Rebels in the Field

From: Task Force on Alliance Security

Regarding: Attached Alliance Intelligence Reports Excerpts

Friends:

Following you will find a selection of several datafiles detailing those individuals or groups believed to be a threat to Alliance security. In the research of the Task Force, we have discovered a large number of groups or individuals who, though not directly aligned with the Empire, present serious threats to our cause and must be closely watched in these crucial days of the war.

Many of the individuals to be found in this file are already wanted for crimes against the Alliance. Unfortunately, we have such a large number of threatening individuals who oppose the Rebellion that any extensive list of them is near impossible. Nonetheless, we have tried to do so.

The recent demise of General Verman has left Intell in dire need of trustworthy agents and trustworthy information: most of the information contained herein we feel to be quite accurate. We ask that those of you fighting in the field take into consideration the files contained within this collection and heed them. If you happen upon any the individuals or groups detailed within the following dossiers, please be aware of the potential danger they represent.

We consider these and the other files to be but a beginning; only a fraction of what will be compiled. Many of the operatives whose work was invaluable in the preparation of these reports have also expressed a willingness in preparing additional reports on other threats to Alliance security. We have discussed the matter of interviewing several of our prominent agents so that we may shine light on additional threats to our Alliance.

We would like to extend our sincere appreciation to all those Alliance operatives, agents and officers who serve our cause and have aided the development of this project, and especially those who submitted many of the SecuriDex files from which we worked.

Good day and may the Force be with us.

Respectfully,

Task Force on Alliance Security

[member names omitted for brevity]

First Day of School

(Transcript of introductory statements given to incoming students by Master Barosa Warren at Surveyor Hall conference room 4: first day of instruction)

"Most of you probably came here with the idea that you're going to show how tough you are, how much punishment you can endure, and how fast you can light a tazrin flit.

"But the *facts* are as follows: you will pushed beyond what your species is designed to endure; you will be taught not only how to survive in a given environment but how to thrive in that environment; you will learn not only where and how to find food and shelter in hostile conditions but how to combat an enemy in those lands. You will be taught to best a Mon Cal in the seas though you are a Silika*; you will best the Wookiees when you encounter them in the trees; you will learn the intricacies of zero-g survival so that even an Imperial spacetrooper will fear you. You will learn skills for every environment, every condition. You will learn the true meaning of *survival*. Many of those with whom you sit you will not see for weeks, if ever again. Some of you will perish. Very few of you will complete the entire course, but you will know that you have become the best you can be.

"Now turn to datapage 2,584 of your *Expedition* texts, Volume 56 ..."

Graduation

Thrantin Major's red glare slowly intensified as it crept from behind the Kalis Peaks. A dozen figures stood at the edge of a high rock face, watching the sun climb. The figures were harnessed in manual climbing equipment: in this land, no repulsorcraft or gravitic gear was permitted. The moment the entire disc of Thrantin Major had exposed itself over the spires of the Kalis Range, the group quickly began to make their way down the face. A young near-Human male, Sisquoc of the Samuac Sukeu, led the descent.

At the bottom of the 200-meter drop was the thick vegetation of the Turas Valley. The thick leafy plants appeared black under the red light of the sun, and within them lived thousands of different life-forms. Sisquoc gathered his gear while his companions each made their way to the valley floor. He looked across the designated Zones of Territory C2 — they had to cross all of it to complete their instruction.

When the last person was down, Sisquoc and Xe began forging a trail that would lead them through the Second Jungle Zone. Theirs was, in Sisquoc's mind, the perfect team: they had a native of nearly every terrain type they would have to endure in their trek. The group entered the jungle, the sun at their back.

• • •

Four and a half days later, Akul leading the way, the group emerged from the crashing waves and kelp beds of the Ninth Aquatic Zone. As the group collapsed in fatigue on the green sand, Derembus triumphantly retrieved his comlink. As they lay exhausted, the group watched as the sun began to fall behind the

glaciers on the horizon.

"Zone Central, this is Team 8," Derembus called into the comm.

"Copy, Team 8. Go ahead."

"Requesting pickup at AquaZone 9, 12 passengers."

"Is there a problem?" the filtered voice asked.

"Negative," Derembus called. "Our route has been completed."

There was a long pause on the other side, and the entire group laughed as much as their exhausted bodies would allow. Finally, a response came through. "Marktime 103.7 hours, Team 8."

"Copy, Central," Derembus cheered.

"Central out," the amazed voice answered before ending the transmission.

Derembus switched off the comlink and jumped on his companions relaxing in the sand. He didn't care that he was aggravating the wound he had received from the tripion attack in the Desert Zone.

They had survived! That was all he cared about. They had completed their "final exam" in less than 104 hours, smashing the previous record by more than an entire day.

When the transport finally arrived and the pilots hauled the students' haggard bodies aboard, the team was greeted by two Carosite medics and a Two-Onebee medical droid. Their wounds were attended to as the shuttle lifted off in the fading light.

The jubilant team hollered in triumph as the shuttle traversed the landscape in the Thrantin twilight.

A Professional Matter

Callandri rubbed her arm as she examined the holographic map in front of her. Her cousin Zayl looked up from cleaning her blaster pistol. "Still planning, Callandri?"

Callandri looked on the map and drew her face back in a tight, predatory smile. "Yes ... those two agents are going to come here, to the Zanitar, to meet their contacts."

The lotran, Rodick Tag, looked on impassively. "We should attack from this alley. Do we get them before or after they meet?"

"After ... we need the data tapes more than the 10,000 credits they have. The Alliance will pay us a handsome sum to get those tapes back. And the agents should be worth nearly as much as the tapes."

"How much do they know?"

Callandri deactivated the holo. "Not much. They know the datatapes detail planned Imperial fleet movements for this sector and that they are being held by a pair of Duros smugglers."

Vadon the Rodian moved to the table. "What about the Duros? Should we attempt to gain their money as well?"

Callandri shook her head slowly. "No. That would draw too much attention. They aren't worth anything to us."

Arcuse, the Ubese bounty hunter, watched on silently. His helmet hid his expressions from view, but his silence indicated his approval of the mission. Finally, his metallic voice rumbled through the room. "This will no doubt draw Lochner and his companions. It will be a personal challenge to combat."

Callandri responded curtly. "This is a business transaction. Its only purpose is financial gain. If Lochner and his friends are drawn into this, it is a happy coincidence."

Zayl nodded. "Callandri, as always, is right. This is just a professional matter ... one which may make us all wealthier."

Arcuse nodded slowly. "So it would seem."

An Offer They Couldn't Refuse

Denuab and Dorin watched from the viewport as their transport disengaged the *Gant Warrior*. Denuab slumped across the room and sat in the old but comfortable thermchair. It sent soothing pulses of warmth through his tired body. His brother came over and sat at the round table opposite the thermchair.

"You think it'll happen this time?" Denuab asked of his brother.

"Not a chance," Dorin responded. "This is just a big waste of time. What do we need a truce for? We're pirates, after all! We ought to just gather the rest of the gang and blow this little greenie straight through the Fire Rings of Fornax."

Denuab didn't agree with his brother, but neither did he wish to argue with him. He was sure Safonne's pirates were more heavily armed than the Fly'thorns, and that if a war were to break out the Venithons and their companions would surely be in the hurt vector. He thought for a moment, but, as usual, his brother didn't wait for his reply.

"Look," Dorin said as he leaned toward his brother. "I don't care how tough Safonne thinks he is. If I have to, I'll —"

At that moment the comm crackled to life. "Sirs, we've docked with their corvette and will be going aboard soon."

The twins stood and walked to the main exit. By the time they arrived to the docking tube, the seals had already be secured and the tube pressurized. Safonne's people wasted no time.

Denuab opened the secondary lock and stepped into the tube, Dorin quickly catching up to him. At the other end stood two sleazy-looking Devaronian males, one dressed in tattered black robes, the other sporting what looked like a discarded Bespin Wing Guard uniform. When they reached the lockbay of Safonne's corvette, the Ithorian twins were patted down for weaponry, and Dorin's vibroblade was taken from him, as was his heavy blaster pistol, standard blaster pistol, and several hidden explosive devices. Denuab had no weaponry, only a small trinket around his neck with sharp edges. One of the Devaronians reasoned it was intended as a bludgeon.

The last seal door hissed open and the twins entered *Safonne's Sword*. They were led down a poorly-lit hallway to a small rectangular room with a number of gravcouches against its walls. A narrow bulkhead against the far wall was open, and through the door the twins could see a Rodian male sitting at a small table.

"Come in," Safonne beckoned in well-spoken Basic. It was usually quite difficult for a Rodian to speak Basic very clearly, as their tapir-like snout had great difficulty in articulating the various sounds of the language. Impressed, the two Ithorian pirates crossed the lounge and entered Safonne's office, where they seated themselves at the two small chairs across from the Rodian.

"So, the Nalroni's sent you here for another useless truce meeting, huh? He must be getting pretty nervous these days." Safonne opened the top drawer of his bureau and revealed a number of expensive Flyntarian tabac sticks.

"Tabac stick?" he offered, extending two to each of the Ithorians ... one for each mouth.

Denuab politely refused, and Dorin took one of the two offered him. The autoigniter clicked and Dorin puffed, irritated at the Rodian's confidence.

"It's nothing personal, but this sector belongs to me," Safonne said. "You'd best tell Ompiach he'd be better off packing up and finding someplace else to pillage."

Dorin rose in indignation, but Denuab held him back before his brother got them into any serious trouble.

"Mr. Perdon," Denuab said, "we're not here because we want to be, we're here because Ompiach sent us to attempt one more round of diplomacy with you before a war breaks out. If we fail to produce a treaty of some sort our futures with the organization will be ... uncertain."

"Uncertain!" Safonne laughed. "What kind of pirates are you? Your organization is far too rigid." He paused. "My group is a *brotherhood*, not a group of slaves under some backstabbing Nalroni who'd probably jet you out the airlock for a measly 50 creds. You've been limiting yourself by sticking around such a sorry case."

The Rodian thought for a moment, then continued. "Why don't you join with me? I know about you and what you've accomplished in the past. You'd make a strong addition to my group."

Though not expecting the offer, the twins both kept their sabacc faces. Denuab spoke first. "Sorry, Pendon, we're not interested. But thanks anyway."

Dorin was less eloquent. "No thanks snout-nose!"

Ignoring an insult that would have usually have gotten any other being killed on the spot, the Rodian continued. "I'll tell you what: I usually only offer new members a quarter-share of the booty until they've proven themselves. For you I'll make an exception. You join and I'll give you a triple share of anything we grab as partners. That's more than fair ... and probably a good deal more than you're getting now. Deal?"

It was an excellent offer. The twins had been with Ompiach over four years now and still

hadn't gotten up to a triple share. But the twins still weren't sure, and Pendon could see this.

His tabac stick nearly burned out, he dropped it down the refuse chute on the side of his desk. "Look," he explained, "you just said yourself that if you don't get this treaty your futures are uncertain, and that's probably putting it mildly. So I'll make the decision easy for you. I could really use your skills for a raid we're planning. If you don't join, I declare war. And you'll be the ones to deliver the news to old Ompiach."

The twins appeared a little more convinced, but Denuab still said, "Well, we'll think about it."

Salonne's snout curled into what was the equivalent of a Rodian smile. "The way I see it," Salonne finished, "you two don't have a whole lot of options."

37:F1:4/DSN/T11R/ESS.3.CAR/POL/ D.Mipps

New Order Captures Parliament Majority

Camalar, Esseles

For the first time in over two decades, the Forad party has lost its lock on the Hall majority. With yesterday's election returns tallied and processed, it became clear that the Esselian New Order party had made sweeping inroads into the parliamentary body.

Jamson Freller, the leader of the ENO party, was ecstatic at the gains made in the Hall. "We are poised on the edge of a brilliant new era," he told a huge crowd gathered at the Nurumbal Shrine to celebrate the victory. "Tomorrow we open a new chapter in Esseles' history, a return to her glorious days of empire and sector dominance. Arm in arm with our Coruscant comrades, we will shed the dead weight of past indulgences."

Though Freller did not explain what indulgences he was referring to, observers are surmising that it refers to Esseles' Foradian policy of employing large numbers of aliens. Freller has promised to call for new presidential elections within a few days. He is expected to accept his party's nomination.

By Deena Mipps, Darpa SectorNet

Jante and Freda Feud Turns to War

Reynols, Jante

The Rettna system erupted in battle yesterday when Freda system militias launched a surprise attack on Jante holdings in Rettna. The Freda 1st, 3rd, and 5th Lon Flotillas participated in the attacks. The first strike destroyed the Hamner Heavy Ores Plant in orbit around Rett II. A second and third strike against two other Jante Materials Corp plants orbiting Rett II were equally successful.

The Jante Rett II orbital defense force responded by pursuing and engaging the Freda 3rd and 5th Lon Flotillas. After inflicting heavy casualties, the Jante forces were forced to withdraw as the Freda 1st Lon joined the other two flotillas in repulsing

the counterattack. Freda now holds the orbital space around Rett II, and is presently off-loading troops to seize the ground installations. Jante is marshaling its forces in the orbit of Rett I, their sole remaining mining colony in the system.

Moff Haveland is reportedly enraged at the surprise attack. He stated in a press conference this morning that he is ordering Imperial CompForce units into the system to enforce a cease-fire. He hinted strongly that Jante and Freda would both face punitive measures for allowing the dispute to boil over into open conflict. The Jante delegation is protesting its innocence in the affair, and plans to petition the Moff for a hearing tomorrow.

The dispute between Jante and Freda over mining rights in the Rettna system is decades old, and nearly led to war three months ago when miners from the Freda and Jante systems began sabotaging one another's plants. At the behest of Moff Haveland, the two governments have been participating in peace talks for the last two months. The talks broke down early this week when the Freda delegation withdrew from the negotiations. Freda President Rolf Petruma said at the time he was dissatisfied with the lack of progress made in the talks, and blamed the intractability of the Jante delegation for the problem. He gave no sign that his government was considering military options.

Imperial HoloVision

37:1:6/BSN/BAC.2.AMM/GEN

Rebels Strike Brak Sector CommNet

Amma, Bacrana

In their boldest action to date, Rebel terrorists attacked Brak Sector's CommNet, disrupting communications throughout the sector. In star systems everywhere, Imperial and civilian communications were suddenly wiped out as relay stations and transmitters were destroyed. While some stations reported attacks against them, most discovered their equipment sabotaged to self-destruct yesterday. Heavily armed freighters destroyed two deep space relays. Most stations reported few casualties.

While the blackout was wide-spread, in the end it proved to be useless as backup systems quickly came on-line. Heavily populated areas reported few disruptions in local traffic, although nearly all long distance communications were hampered for several hours. Some outlying areas remained cut off for nearly one day.

It is unclear what the Rebels hoped to achieve by their attacks, as no other incidents were reported. Moff Raimier called the raids "cowardly and trivial." Indeed, to most of the citizenry, they were but minor annoyances.

Brak Sector News

The Yard Of Opportunity

Your boss at Executive Results had eluded detailed questions concerning your current destination. He had earned your respect, so you remained patient and proceeded as scheduled. Exiting hyperspace, the navcode activates the autopilot, and your starship descends into planet Valgauth's murky atmosphere. Scopes are in the green as the deflector shields hold steady against atmospheric friction. The ship soars through black and gray clouds clinging to the vessel like gaseous parasites.

Breaking the cloud layer, a repulsive scene pans before you. Twisting mountains of wreckage cover the planet's surface and reach to the sky like decrepit monuments. Blue, green and yellow fires flicker, devouring any burnable refuse. Outside the viewport lingers a corrosive atmosphere of machine fluids, toxic waste and biological rot. Structures materialize in front of your vessel through the hazy precipitation. This is the Yard, your destination.

The landing cycle engages as you approach a cluster of titanic manufacturing silos orbited by droid barges. One silo's armored exterior opens to expose a landing berth bathed in orange light. A soft lurch signals touchdown, and a delicate mechanical arm extends toward your ship, blasting the ramp area with fluids. Klaxons signal all clear after sterilized vapor rises off the vessel. Descending the landing ramp, a rancid stench invades your senses and the polluted storm intensifies as the bay doors close. Awaiting your arrival is a motionless, green protocol droid. As you approach, it becomes animated and speaks.

"Welcome to the Yard. I am A-3T0. Come with me, fellow scum." It gestures toward a corridor. "Syndicate One awaits ..."

Performer Shocks Ball With Alien Dance

Femon, Gailea

Guests attending the famous and exclusive annual Marqua Spas Grand Ball were shocked when floubette artist Jantaa Binx strode onto the dance floor and began performing during the third course of the traditional Panelan feast.

Floubette dance, an idealized form of the Floubettean mating ritual, is considered aesthetically pleasing when performed by avian performers. Unfortunately, the sight of a human performing the dance is somewhat shocking (some would say revolting), as the ball attendees discovered to their dismay. Binx, the only known human performer of floubette dance, got nearly a third of the way through her performance before being escorted off the dance floor and off the premises.

Falaco Don-DeMardo, the general manager of the Spas, was mortified by the incident, and this morning sacked his assistant manager Tarin DeHallo, who booked the performer. "I had no idea she was a human," sobbed DeHallo as she was escorted off the Spa premises with a box of belongings. "How was I supposed to know that? Who ever heard of a human floubette dancer? It was horrible."

TriNebulon News

Combat Moon

The hologram of the S'krree warrior lunged at Mika with its bladelike forearms. Mika spun aside, jabbing his practice dagger into its abdomen.

"Penetration of lower thorax," Leda's voice came over the loudspeaker. "Result: severed nerve column."

The holographic S'krree shimmered and altered slightly. Now it was holding a two-meter staff with a blade at one end. An energy pike. Swinging the pike, the S'krree attacked again. Mika ducked the sweeping blow and slipped around the insectoid-hologram as his dagger blade passed through the two small, diaphanous wings on its back.

The hologram froze. Leda's voice again came over the loudspeaker, this time slightly bewildered. "Dismemberment of vestigial wings. The S'krrr don't even need those wings, Mika. No damage."

Mika Streev wiped a thin sheen of sweat from his forehead. He could see Leda through the transparisteel window of the practice room's control booth.

"Psychological damage, Leda," he panted. "The S'krrr use those wings to speak their traditional language. Also, they're a hard target, and therefore an honorable one."

The practice room door slid open with a sigh, and Leda Kyss stood framed in the portal. Like Mika, she wore the red bandoleer of a Rabaanite warrior, heavily stitched with merit-signs. Unlike Mika, her bandolier lacked the symbol of Rabaan's highest honor: the sunburst sigil of an artist who has created his masterpiece.

Leda strode forward and pointed at the hologram of the S'krrr. Standing 1.7 meters tall, the gray insectoid looked like a series of sharp angles designed to intimidate. Its large black eyes gleamed coldly, set high on the S'krrr's triangular head. A hard-shelled exoskeleton covered even the face, making the mantis-like S'krrr's emotions inscrutable to all but the most attentive humans.

Leda pointed at the formidable looking creature. "You're fighting a single combat that will decide the future of Rabaan. How can you bring up honor and artistry at a time like this?"

Mika grinned. "What better time to bring it up? You think I'm going to let a little political debate about which species destroyed who's orbital platform get in my way? That's for bureaucrats to decide. Me, I hone my skills. That's the whole point of being a warrior, isn't it?"

Leda's face grew suddenly distant. "Here, maybe. Not everywhere..." she muttered.

"Leda, are you okay? You've been in a daze for months. Maybe you picked up something on Circarpous IV. Don't know why you bothered to go off-planet in the first place."

"To see what's out there, Mika. You may be the best artist-warrior on Rabaan, but there's more to life than combat rituals. It's a big galaxy out there, and trust me, there are places half a day's jump from Rabaan where they don't care how the battle is won. They'll wipe out a planet to get at one person."

Mika sneered. "Barbarians! I'm surprised the Empire doesn't put a stop to that sort of brutishness."

Leda frowned, but said nothing.

* * *

One hundred eighty-six million kilometers closer to the Ishanna system's yellow sun, the planet S'krrr made its way steadily through the vacuum of space. Forty kilometers of atmosphere shielded the living creatures of S'krrr from that vacuum. One half kilometer of forest canopy shaded the top soil of S'krrr from the system's hot sun. Two meters of duracrete lay between that top soil and the ceiling of the small subterranean chamber where Sh'shak of the S'krrr had chosen the mantra of distance for his meditation exercise.

He, too, was preparing for battle. As a part of his mind continued the mantra of distance, Sh'shak considered the events that had led to this confrontation. One of the Rabaanites' orbital platforms had been destroyed in a shuttle accident (*two meters from a human's head to his feet, head roughly 20 centimeters high...*), an accident which the Rabaanites blamed on the S'krrr. The innocent S'krrr had defended themselves against the accusation, and tempers had risen until war seemed inevitable.

Sh'shak ran one of his blade-like arms (*one-half meter from blade-tip to elbow joint, one-half meter from elbow joint to abdominal link...*) along the ridge of his forehead in a soothing motion. Fortunately, Rabaan and S'krrr had long ago learned to settle their disputes in a civilized fashion. When political solutions could not be found, each planet chose a champion. The two warriors met on neutral ground -- a small, barren planetoid called the Combat Moon. Only one warrior ever left those meetings, and his planet was declared the winner of the dispute.

Sh'shak pressed a button on a nearby console and called up an anatomical display of human body structure. He was reviewing the variety of targets available to him. He did so calmly. He felt no malice toward humans in general, and certainly none for the Rabaanites, for whom he had high regard. But the Combat had been called for, and he, Sh'shak of the warrior caste, had been chosen. He would go to the Combat Moon and kill the Rabaanite he encountered there. And if, as Sh'shak expected, the human warrior proved worthy, Sh'shak would compose a short lyric for him in wing-song.

At the mere thought of wing-song, Sh'shak's small vestigial wings fluttered, rubbing against one another in a gentle *s'krrrrrrr* that had become the species' name in Basic. Millennia of interplanetary activity had convinced the S'krrr to adopt Basic for most communications. But they still kept up their far more difficult -- and far more beautiful -- wing-song language for ceremonial and artistic purposes.

Lost in the sound of wing-song, Sh'shak switched from the mantra of distance to the mantra of balance, as his wings continued to murmur.

* * *

The low murmur in the Star Destroyer *Coercion*'s conference room hushed as Governor Klime entered the room. The Imperial officers seated around the table called him "governor" in deference to his new post as overlord of the Ishanna system and the surrounding systems, but in their minds he was still *General* Klime, the brutal tactician who had brought a dozen worlds to heel for the Empire.

Slow-minded officers wondered why Klime had ever agreed to leave the military for a civilian post. The quick-minded knew, as Klime did, that in these days of the Rebellion, the military no longer offered enough flexibility for the truly ambitious. As a governor, Klime could still use the military to intimidate weak planets, and, in the case of strong planets like Rabaan and S'krrr, rely on subtler means to get what he wanted.

"Report."

An aide snapped to attention. "Despite continued rumors, we have been unable to locate a Rebel base anywhere in the Ishanna system. Intelligence is skeptical of the reliability of the rumors. Our man on Rabaan tells us that the S'krrr and the Rabaanites have arranged for a ritual combat."

"Is our man in place?"

"No, sir. He failed to position himself properly. He is awaiting your instructions."

"Place and time of the Combat?"

"The single moon of Rabaan, known as Combat Moon. Coordinates-- "

"If the moon is in Rabaanite orbit," Klime growled, "our ships may be detected."

"N-no, sir," the aide stuttered. "Both the Rabaanites and the S'krrr are notoriously uninterested in space traffic and travel. Also, Combats traditionally take place at the moon's apogee, when it is too distant for either planet's sensors to make clear readings."

Klime put his hands together, fingers forming a steeple. "Continue."

"Yes, sir. The two combatants will be set down at random locations. Then they will... hunt each other. Time: 1800 hours, two local days from now."

Klime smiled cruelly, and crushed the steeple of his hands into two tight fists. "Commander Glave."

"Sir!" The Imperial commando leaped to his feet, his small eyes staring straight ahead out of pock-marks etched like valleys in his scarred face. Anyone else would have been called a bootlicker for zeal like his, but Glave inspired the kind of sheer terror that prevented such sneering. A veteran of 30 small- and large-scale engagements, Commander Glave had never

lost a battle. In a firefight on Kestos Minor, Glave's helmet was shattered by a point-blank blaster shot, pushing fragments of dura-armor into his face. Ignoring the pain, Glave single-handedly held off a platoon of Rebels until armored AT-ATs had arrived.

Governor Klime eyed this killing machine like a soldier admiring a newly-charged blaster. "Assemble your men, Commander. And call in our local informant as well. When those two locals arrive at this Combat Moon, I want your team ready and waiting."

* * *

"Mika, I'm waiting!" Leda pounded on the door. "Mika!"

"Here." Leda whirled as the voice whispered in her ear. Instinctively she drew her dagger and slashed. Mika caught her wrist with casual ease and kissed her quickly on the lips. The young woman tugged her hand away and sheathed the blade.

"Don't ever do that!" Leda yelled. "I might have hurt you!"

Mika shrugged. "Just wanted to see how your reflexes were. Pretty good. But you shouldn't let people sneak up on you like that."

Leda grumbled and stalked toward the door. "Most people don't walk with their feet off the ground like you do, Mika. Come on. And don't kiss me in public!"

Mika grinned at Leda's shyness. It was old-fashioned, that Rabaanite prohibition against public displays of emotion among the un-Promised. But since Mika had failed to offer her his Promise, he couldn't really complain about her prudishness. He suspected it was only her way of telling him he'd better act soon.

The door slid open and they walked down the Arcade, the long main hall of the Gymnasium. The Gymnasium covered five full city blocks in the center of Ban Belos, the capital city of Rabaan. The multi-level complex served as living quarters, training center and competitive arena for Rabaan's best warriors. The very cream of the crop, such as Mika, were provided with personal suites and private training studios just off the Arcade. It was the most prestigious address on the planet.

In the hours before Mika's departure for the Combat, Gymnasium security had made the Arcade off-limits to everyone but residents. As Mika and Leda passed by the long stone columns, their footsteps echoed in the empty space.

"It's like a ghost town," Leda said. "Spoke too soon."

Coming toward them down the hall was a very tall man -- so tall that he had to duck under an archway to keep from banging his dark-haired head on a decorative stone beam. His red

bandoleer hung lazily across his lanky frame, but the sunburst sigil had been polished to a conspicuous shine.

"Mika Streev," the tall man said through a tight smile. "Is it that time already?"

"Hello, Andos," Mika said. "Leda, you know Andos, don't you? My neighbor -- with the second best apartment in the Arcade."

The grin never left Andos' face. "They would have given me yours, Mika, but they had to save it for someone of smaller stature." He turned to Leda. "Pleased to meet you."

Leda nodded her head. "I recognize you from the Games, of course."

Andos yawned. "Yes, yes, my name has become a household word since I lost to Mika in the finals for the right to champion Rabaan. Every teenager on the planet now thinks of me as 'that other contestant.' Well, well, they say things always work out for the best. Good luck against the shell-head, Mika."

His tight smile beamed down at them again, and he passed on, his long legs carrying him nimbly down the Arcade.

Leda watched him go. "There's bitter soil to plant a bad seed in."

Mika shrugged. "Sour grapes, that's all. It's tough to be second best at something. I think Andos had his heart set on championing Rabaan this time."

They reached the entrance to the Arcade, an antique wooden gate, supposedly the original gate to the old Gymnasium in ancient days. Beyond, they could hear a low and constant murmur.

Leda paused and took a deep breath. "Are you ready?" Mika nodded. "Please don't make a scene. We've got more important things to do."

Mika nodded again.

The gate opened with a loud creak, and the two humans were assaulted by a storm of light and noise. Cheers erupted from the crowd that had waited hours for a glimpse of Mika Streev, the champion of Rabaan.

"Mika! Mika!" "Get 'em, son!"

"We're counting on you, Mika!"

Mika grinned broadly and waved back at the crowd. As he stepped forward, the mass of people flowed to either side like parting waters, clearing a path to his waiting shuttle. Grizzled old Rabaanite men, star-struck girls, and young boys dreaming of glory all reached

out to touch his shoulder or his arm. "I stood this close to Mika Streev," they'd tell their grandchildren.

Leda followed a step behind with a shadow on her brow. Members of the holonews caught every beaming smile, every wink, every laugh, in the lenses of their palm-sized holo-cams and beamed the images around the globe. Rabaan was sending its star warrior off to defend the honor of the planet, and the press was eating it up. At the shuttle Mika turned and raised his hands, and the crowd erupted anew. A hundred lenses reflected her image as Leda tugged at Mika's sleeve and motioned toward the shuttle, and a billion holos around the planet copied Mika's innocent shrug as he turned back to his adoring fans.

The shuttle's departure was delayed for half an hour while Mika basked in their adoration.

Finally, Leda dragged Mika into the shuttle and the automated door hummed closed and locked. Leda dropped into the pilot's seat and brooded over her controls, loading coordinates into the nav computer and slapping switches until the pocket cruiser's engines groaned to life. Having ridden the sleek new ships so readily available throughout the galaxy, Leda was painfully aware of how backward Rabaan had become. Its people simply were not interested in space travel, and it showed in their small, dilapidated fleet. She felt like she was piloting a rowboat.

The antique cruiser shuddered as the repulsorlift engines seemed to push the planet away from them. After a few moments, they were lifted into the stratosphere. With an irritated flick of her fingers, Leda activated an obsolete Hoersch-Kessel ion drive that threw the reluctant ship forward.

As soon as the ancient pocket cruiser settled into a smooth flight path, Leda turned to Mika.

"You're disgusting."

"What?" he asked innocently.

"How could you do that!"

"Do wh--?"

"Stand there soaking in all that glory like this was some game of Mon Calamari dive-ball!"

Mika blinked. "What are Mon Calamaris?"

"Oh, space!" Leda slammed her fist into the cruiser's bulkhead. "That's right, I forgot. You've never been off planet. You've never seen what's going on out there! You've never given a thought to anything farther than your next trophy!"

Mika had seen Leda Kyss fight for her life. He'd seen her train 10 hours a day, every day for a year, to earn her red bandoleer. He'd seen her cry in frustration after losing matches in the Games, and he'd seen her punch a hole in the wall over a false rumor that he was cheating on her. But he'd never seen her this angry about anything. The warrior in him wanted to snap back, to match her aggression with his own. But the lover in him wouldn't allow it.

"Leda," he said patiently. "I don't understand. Rabaan's had a warrior caste for as long as anyone can remember, and you and I are part of it. This is what we are. This is what we do. Not just me -- both of us."

Leda put her head in her hands. "It's just that sometimes I get so angry... "

"Why? You didn't used to, and I know I haven't changed. What has?"

Leda looked up. Her eyes were moist with tears, but her face was taut with frustration. At first Mika thought it was directed at him, but then he saw her staring past him, through him, out toward something huge and distant that angered and terrified her. The muscles in her jaw worked angrily. Then she released the tension in one long, exhausted breath.

"Oh, Mika. There's so much I wish I could tell you. I trust you... but I can't."

Mika gently touched her wrist with hands that could break bones with ease. "Leda, did something happen to you off-planet? Did someone do something to you...?"

"Yes!" Leda said. "But nothing bad -- unless you call growing up a bad thing. I met... some people off-planet, Mika. They showed me what was going on in the galaxy. They showed me-- " Her voice dropped to a whisper and she looked around suspiciously, as though the curved bulkhead of the old ship were leaning in to eavesdrop. " They showed me that the Empire is evil."

There was silence.

Mika cocked his head to one side. He didn't know what to say. Leda might as well have told him that the air was evil, or the soil of Rabaan was evil. The Empire was the Empire -- as much a fact and foundation of life as the air or the soil: sometimes benign, sometimes troublesome, but always, always, fundamental to the natural order of things.

At least he had always thought so, until he looked into Leda's eyes as she pleaded with him to understand.

"The Empire takes planets by force. They destroy governments. They enslave whole populations--"

"Ridiculous!" Mika snorted. "If that happened, we'd know all about it--"

"How?" Leda snapped back. "Over the newsnets? Who controls the newsnets? The Empire!"

"Yeah, but there are other ways. Merchants. Tourists. There's a lot of traffic going through hyperspace. Word would get around."

"Word does get around, Mika," Leda said. "The Rebels make sure of that. They're organized. They're fighting back... and lately they've even been winning."

"Rebels?" Mika laughed. "Organized? You believe that nonsense? The Rebel Alliance is nothing but a load of bantha fodder spread by gossiping merchants and..." He paused.

"Tourists?" Leda finished.

Confident she had won the debate, she returned to her instruments.

Mika studied Leda for a moment, studied her with eyes trained to assess the skills of a worthy opponent. He saw a new power in his old friend, a power unfamiliar to him. He had seen warriors gain confidence as they mastered new weapons, but this was different. Leda Kyss had not entered a new phase of her soldiering. Somewhere, out in the cosmos, she had entered a larger world.

* * *

On the far side of the Combat Moon, a S'krrr cruiser arced in a single orbit around the satellite's gray surface. Aboard the vessel, Sh'shak glided across the cargo hold between rows of mantis-like companions. None of them spoke. There were no parting words in S'krrr, neither good luck nor good-bye. There was only the graceful fluttering of the wings of memory.

Sh'shak entered the small escape pod and quickly checked its instruments. The pod was designed for a single atmospheric reentry. Once it touched down, it would become a useless heap of melted wiring and cracked repulsor casings.

Next Sh'shak calmly checked his only weapon -- a two-meter telescoping energy pike. Skrrr-human combats were traditional and honorable, as well as violent. Both sides preferred to use traditional hand-to-hand weapons.

Of course, one may be prudent as well as honorable, Sh'shak thought as he patted the small hold-out blaster hidden in his belt. Lastly, Sh'shak checked the portable commnet uplink in his pack -- or rather, the half of the uplink in his possession. The human would have the other half. Alone, each unit was useless. When fitted together, the device could send a signal strong enough to reach either Rabaan or S'krrr, where each side waited anxiously.

The first triumphant word spoken on that commnet channel would send rescue ships racing toward the moon -- and signal victory. For the losers, there would only be silence.

Sh'shak triggered a mechanism and the hatch door closed. Without ceremony he pressed a switch, and the escape pod burst out of its mothership's belly like a steely newborn leaping toward its first moments of life. Then the onboard computers came online, and the pod steadied into a landing vector. Sh'shak glanced out the viewport at the swiftly growing moon. Somewhere nearby, he knew, his human opponent was doing the same.

* * *

There was smoke and heat. The world spun and shook and then roared to a jarring halt.

Mika coughed amid the fumes and the crackle of fusing circuits.

He kicked blindly and the escape pod hatch gave way. Smoke poured out and Mika followed it into the thin air of Combat Moon.

The moon's thin atmosphere supported little life. Stunted, spiny trees thrust up from the gray waste, splotching the tundra with patches of green and brown. Localized tectonic activity had rifled the plains with long spines of low, jagged hills, as though a giant had cut furrows with a colossal plow.

Waving away thin wisps of smoke, Mika reached into the pod and grabbed his pack. With fluid grace he slipped a thin stiletto into its wrist sheath, then strapped his long Ibarsi knife across his back warrior-fashion, the sheath resting diagonally from left hip to right shoulder. Although called a knife, the Ibarsi was nearly as long as a lightsaber. However, its only power source was Mika Streev's good right arm.

Mika hefted the pack with its remaining contents -- emergency rations, his half of the uplink array, and a palm-sized blaster (just in case) -- and set out.

He did not know the S'krrr's landing coordinates. But he did know this: both pods had been programmed to land near the equator. The S'krrr would have touched down somewhere near the terminus of night. Glancing up at the mid-morning sun, Mika tightened the straps on his back and headed east.

The hunt was on.

"Do you think they did it?"

Leda's question came back to him. In orbit around Combat Moon, she had broken their journey's silence with that query.

"Do you think they did it?"

"Hmm?" Mika had been deep in thought. "Who? Did what?"

"The S'krrr. Do you think they destroyed our orbital platform?"

"Oh. I don't know. I haven't thought about it. I mean, if it wasn't them, who was it?"

Leda frowned. "Someone who would benefit from a conflict between Rabaan and S'krrr. Someone who'd like to see both planets weakened by an infra-system war."

By now Mika recognized the tone in her voice. "The Empire?"

"Who else?"

Mika shrugged. He had had enough of this Rebel-rousing. Besides, he had a duel to win. "Well, they'll be disappointed. This conflict is only going to end with one dead S'krrr."

Leda's voice softened. The light in her eyes softened from anger to fear -- fear for him.

"Mika, if it is the Empire, they won't be satisfied with that. They've gone to too much trouble already."

"What are you suggesting, Leda? Or should I say, what are your friends suggesting, since this sounds like you repeating their words."

Almost tenderly, she explained, "My ... friends ... think the Empire wants to get a tighter grip on this system without resorting to brute force. A planetary conflict would be the perfect excuse to bring in a strong garrison, and sabotaging the Combat would be an easy way to start a war."

Mika squinted. "And these friends of yours. Where are they?"

Leda's voice had fallen to a whisper. "Closer than you think."

But he refused to get drawn into her conspiratorial mood and leaned back, frowning skeptically.

Realizing she had failed, Leda leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. "Good luck, Mika. And keep your eyes open."

Shifting his pack, Mika touched his cheek where her lips had brushed against him. His skin still tingled.

He had known Leda since they were children, playing the mock warrior games of Rabaan. He remembered sitting across from her in the throwing circle, target-shooting with her when they were old enough to hold dart-guns. He even remembered the first time that, despite his competitive spirit, he had let her win at Knives. He could not remember a time when he did not want to be with her, when he did not care for her.

But not until she returned from her off-world trip with her new attitude and her alien ideas did he realize that he loved her.

As soon as the Combat is over, he told himself, I'll ask her to make the Promise with me.

She would agree, he was sure of it. Leda was his perfect match, and--

Mika heard a noise. He dropped into a crouch and slipped into a copse of stunted trees, waiting. He heard it again -- the tinny chink of metal on metal. Instantly, all thoughts of Leda and the future left him. He was a warrior, and he'd found his prey.

Sh'shak heard the sound of branches scraping in the heavy air. He froze in place, his skeletal face an implacable mask as he achieved an utter stillness impossible for most species. He listened.

Somewhere, one leaf touched another. Slowly, very slowly, Sh'shak drew his weapon.

Mika stepped lightly, avoiding twigs, leaning away from branches that might make noise, as he crept toward his target. The noise came from the other side of the copse. The Ibarsi knife slid soundlessly from its sheath.

Reaching the edge of the stunted grove, Mika gently pulled back a branch, and almost gasped out loud. Below him in a dusty glen sat two pocket cruisers, their dull white hulls coated with a layer of gray dust. Two men in familiar clothing sat together. Rabaanites. But here?

They were assembling some sort of tech device. That was the metallic sound Mika had heard.

Why would there be more Rabaanites on Combat Moon?

Mika studied the scene suspiciously. The pocket cruisers had all the looks of Rabaanite ships -- antiquated, patched, and sulking on their landing gear like unappreciated banthas. The men, too, looked Rabaanite in their brown robes and red bandoleers. He didn't recognize them, but of course he couldn't claim to know every warrior in the Gymnasium.

A third man stepped out of one of the cruisers, so tall he had to duck to avoid the bulkhead.

"Andos!"

The word leaped from Mika's lips. The two men on the ground whirled and drew their weapons, but Andos yelled, "Don't blast him!" With remarkable discipline, the two men held their fire.

Mika stood up and jogged down the slope into the glen. He eyed the two Rabaanites carefully. Something about their appearance bothered him. Their clothes were Rabaanite,

their faces were Rabaanite, the tools they used to assemble their machine looked Rabaanite...

"Mika!" Andos said in a voice full of concern. "Are you all right?"

Mika blinked. "Of course. I've only just arrived. What are you doing here?"

Andos frowned and put a friendly hand on Mika's shoulder. "Just after you left we received intelligence that the S'krrr were planning to sabotage the Combat. There's a whole platoon of shell-heads waiting to ambush you." He nodded toward the other two men. "The Assembly sent us here to back you up and we almost turned out the engines on these old wrecks beating you here. This is Jan, and that's--"

"Wait a minute," Mika mumbled. "Since when do the S'krrr dishonor Combat? Their whole culture is about codes and honor."

Andos sighed. "I don't think the shell-heads had much choice." The tall warrior looked to his two companions for confirmation.

The one called Jan nodded and grumbled, "It's the Empire. They're moving in, forcing the S'krrr against us."

Mika was still confused. But what Andos said seemed to fit Leda's warning. After all, she hadn't known what the Empire was up to, just that they were planning "something." Maybe this was it. And, personal feelings aside, if the Assembly had wanted to reinforce the Combat, Andos, as runner-up, was the logical choice to send.

He relaxed. "All right, Andos, tell me everything you know." Mika moved past the other two warriors and stepped over the disassembled machine they were working on. His eyes widened. Even field stripped, he recognized it: a mint condition Balmorran M-5 repeating blaster cannon polished to a high shine. Only one type of soldier in the galaxy had access to weapons like that. "Stormtroop--!"

The barrel of a blaster crashed down on his neck, smothering the word. The blow jarred him to the teeth and he dropped his Ibarsi knife, but in the same motion Mika rolled forward and came up on his feet. His quick reflexes startled the two disguised troopers, but not Andos. The tall warrior was already in flight, delivering an elaborate spinning kick. Mika side-stepped and lashed out with two rigid fingers that connected with Andos' throat in mid-air. Gagging, the Rabaanite fell to the ground in a heap.

The two stormtroopers swarmed him. That was their mistake. Given time to think, Mika might have hesitated to attack two representatives of the Empire. But in the heat of the moment they were only so many fists and elbows and knees flying at him, and Mika responded as he'd been trained to do from birth. The trooper called Jan went down as

Mika's foot smashed his knee. The Rabaanite champion ducked a blow from the other and was about to finish him when a mountain fell on him from behind and his legs gave out from under him.

Andos, he thought as everything went black.

* * *

Feeling returned first. His head throbbed. Something like wire bit into his wrists, which were pinned behind his back. He was lying in the dust.

Hearing returned next. The buzzing in his head faded to angry muttering.

"We should've just blasted him." The one called Jan.

"It would have ruined everything!" Andos. "The S'krrr don't use blasters during Combat. It has to look like the S'krrr killed him. Then we kill the S'krrr and it looks like the Rabaanites betrayed the Combat. Stick to the plan."

"Easy for you to say. You're not crippled!"

Sight came back only reluctantly. Staring out of half-closed eyes, Mika saw hazy silhouettes in the bright noon sun. The faces were a blur, but he knew Andos by his height. Another, probably Jan, was on the ground, propped up on his elbows as the third man tightened a strap on his leg.

"Ah!" Jan cursed. "Space, that hurts! I'm going to kill that abo myself!"

"I'll do it."

Andos tugged at something, and a metal pole telescoped out between his hands. Mika recognized its hum from a thousand practice sessions. A S'krrr energy pike.

"Did you bind his legs?" Andos asked.

The second trooper grunted. "Stop acting like he's an SD-9 war droid with a single-track program, will ya? He's just a backwater planet-boy."

"He's a killing machine," Andos said coolly. "And should be treated like one." The tall Rabaanite started toward Mika.

"I said I'm going to kill him!" Jan struggled to his feet. One leg was stiff inside a plexi-cast. Even limping, he looked ferocious. Mika cursed himself for having been fooled, even for a moment -- the stormtroopers were warriors, true, but not artists like the Rabaanites. More like bullies.

Behind the slits of his half-closed eyes, Mika watched Jan snatch the energy pike from Andos and limp toward him. The other trooper followed with an eager, sadistic grin on his face. Andos trailed behind.

"No sense standing on ceremony." Jan raised the humming pike. Mika did not move, did not even change the rhythm of his breath -- until the moment Jan brought the pike down. In that instant the Rabaanite rolled away and the sharp blade sank half a meter into the ground. From his prostrate position, Mika aimed a side kick that shattered the plexi-cast, and Jan's knee with it. The trooper howled and staggered against his comrade.

Mika rolled up against the energy pike. Ignoring the pain, he pushed through the weapon's thin energy-sheath and rubbed his hands along the vibrating blade until he felt the wires snap. He was free, and on his feet, just as the second trooper reached for his blaster.

The Imperial was fast, but Mika was faster. The thin stiletto left its sheath, then left Mika's hand, then sank into the trooper's throat -- all before the Imperial blaster had cleared its holster.

Jan struggled to one knee, his other leg bent awkwardly behind him. He clawed at his hip, trying to clear his own blaster. Mika admired the man's willpower even as he plucked the energy pike from the ground and ended the fight.

Andos and Mika stared at one another. All his life, Andos had studied the art of war. He knew how fast a fight could end. But even he was awestruck. In the blink of an eye Mika had gone from bound and prostrate victim to combat-ready warrior, killing two Imperial stormtroopers -- two of the Emperor's elite -- in the process.

"Mika," Andos said hoarsely. "Be reasonable. You don't know what you're up against here. You're a very small fish in the biggest pond of all. You're a bug to these people, and they'll squash you." Mika shrugged and turned the energy pike to full power.

"Mika! You have no idea what's going on here."

"I know the Empire wants to garrison the system. I figure they arranged the whole conflict. I know they want to sabotage the Combat. And thanks to you, now I know how." His voice was steady. "But I'll tell you, Andos, that doesn't bother me."

"It doesn't?"

"No." Mika stepped forward. "I never much cared for political intrigue, on planet or off. Leave that to other people, see how they end up." Mika nodded toward the two corpses. "But you were going to kill me, Andos. That's a little more personal."

He took another step.

Andos hesitated, but only for a moment. He faced a man who had already beaten him once, who was probably the most skilled fighter in the whole system, who was both armed and angry. Weighing the various tactics as he had been trained to do, Andos made the obvious strategic choice.

He ran for his life.

Mika chased him for a few meters, then stopped. The adrenaline was draining out of him. As Andos sprang nimbly up the hill and over the rise, Mika fell to his hands and knees. His head throbbed. His hands stung. His body ached. And although he knew it had been in self-defense, he had just murdered two members of the Imperial government -- something told him that his life would never be the same.

* * *

At system's edge, the Star Destroyer *Coercion* pierced the vacuum like a blade cutting the fabric of space. From his personal viewing room atop *Coercion*'s bridge, Governor Klime watched the stars shine below him. Among them, planets were distinguished by their unblinking, reflective light.

Silently, Klime reached out with his hand and, one by one, crushed bright planets in his grip.

A comlink beeped. Klime slapped a button on his control console. "What?"

"You asked for hourly reports, sir," the nervous aide's voice cracked.

"Proceed."

"Commander Glave's squad arrived at the drop zone with their local guide on schedule. Team One went in search of the shell-head, but have made no contact. Team Two encountered the Rabaanite... "

"... and killed him," Klime predicted.

"N-no, sir. They met with some... difficulty."

"What kind of difficulty?"

"The two stormtroopers are dead, sir. The guide escaped and rejoined Team One." The comlink fell silent as the aide awaited a response.

"Hrrrrmmm." The sound came out of Klime like an animal growl. "Tell Commander Glave I expect him to rectify the situation. Immediately. Have we discovered the Rebel outpost yet?"

The comlink crackled. "No, sir. There's been no activity in the shipping lanes. No abnormal activity on either planet, nor on the uninhabited planets in the system. Intelligence believes the rumor to be a hoax..."

"It's not a hoax," Klime interrupted. "I can smell them. This system is as attractive to the Rebels as it is to us, and for the same reasons. They'll be building a landing base or spaceport somewhere, something that can house a short range strike force. Check the uninhabited worlds again for mining activity. Find it."

"Yes, sir--"

Klime slapped the comlink again and it fell silent.

He sank back into his chair, unhappy but philosophical. Glave would handle the situation on the ground. Meanwhile, he had to keep the big picture in mind. Like any worthwhile action, this one required determination and patience.

He reached out and crushed another planet in his grip.

* * *

Mika took a long swallow of water and wished for the hundredth time that he had paid more attention in his tech classes. The two pocket cruisers had been locked down with some kind of operating code. Engines, nav computer, even communications -- everything was dead until the right digital sequence was either input or bypassed. But bypassing it had been way beyond Mika's technical skills, so he'd left the two crates sulking in the dust and started on foot across the moon's dry waste.

Once he'd accepted the fact that he'd killed two stormtroopers, Mika settled down and considered his options, which were extremely limited. He was alone with a limited food supply on a barren space rock. Although everyone in the system knew where he was, no one would come look for him until they received the commnet signal.

And somewhere out there was a S'krrr warrior intent on killing him. But also out there, Mika was sure, were more Imperials. Probably many more. The two pocket cruisers were evidence of that. The main body had probably gone off to hunt the S'krrr while these two remained behind with Andos to take care of him.

A wry smile crossed Mika's face. They had gotten their priorities mixed up. Mika was sure he had Andos' overweening pride to thank for that.

But although Mika had killed two Imperials, the game was far from over. For all he knew, the other troopers had already ambushed the S'krrr and made it look like a Rabaanite plot. Their scheme could still easily succeed. And Mika was sure that, given their strict

observance of rituals, the S'krrr would be insulted by what they thought was a betrayal of the Combat. They would go to war. And the Empire would win.

Mika's only hope was that they hadn't found the S'krrr yet. If he was still alive, together they could foil the Imperial plot.

Foil the Imperial plot... the phrase echoed in Mika's head. What was he thinking? How easily he had slipped into that frame of mind. How quickly he had become a radical. This was the *government* he was talking about, after all. Could they really be that bad? Maybe they were doing all this for a good reason. Maybe even their attempt to kill him had been some sort of acceptable sacrifice for a much larger common good. Maybe Andos had been right -- that there were things going on that were beyond his grasp...

Mika imagined walking into the local magistrate's office and explaining quite calmly that there'd been a misunderstanding. What? Well, yes, he had killed two Imperial stormtroopers, but... Pardon? Yes, he was aware that stormtroopers were the Emperor's personal security force and therefore representatives of the supreme authority in the galaxy, but they were trying to kill him and--

Mika's vision ended with him being dragged off to the spice mines of Kessel, still trying to tell his story. Not good.

Besides, no good government that he could imagine would execute one of its people as coldheartedly as they'd tried to kill him. And he remembered Andos' words, "*You're a bug to these people, and they'll squash you.*" Those were the same people Leda had whispered about.

"We'll see who squashes who," Mika said, adjusting the pack on his back. He was going to stop the Imperials from killing the S'krrr. The irony of the situation was not lost on him. He had come here to kill a S'krrr warrior. Now Mika's only hope was to save him.

* * *

The hangar bay was only half-complete. Mining equipment lay scattered among bits of rubble and debris on the wide, uneven floor. Here and there, trickles of rock fell like dusty waterfalls from the high ceiling where overworked tech crews had not yet put up support beams. In the completed half of the bay, the durasteel floor gleamed. In a large alcove, four aliens of various species moved among gleaming lights and computer displays.

Sensor data was fed from hidden antennae into that alcove for digestion by a rotating crew of Rebel technicians. It was the only area of the hidden base that looked complete, yet even that had a temporary feel to it. The equipment could be disconnected, disassembled, and put on board a freighter in a matter of seconds.

Leda Kyss passed through the sensor alcove almost unnoticed. She paused only to silently name to herself the species operating the equipment: two Bothans and a Givin brought in to calibrate a new sensor. The Givin, naturally uncomfortable at the sight of exposed flesh, caught her stare and self-consciously wrapped his robe tightly about himself, then turned back to his work. She was still trying to accustom herself to the many species she had met since leaving Rabaan.

"Leda Kyss."

Leda turned. The woman who had spoken was a short and sturdy human with curly hair and an open, honest face. But Leda's eyes were drawn to the person next to her: a tall, angular man in a flight suit. She did not know his name, and he did not offer. She would have guessed he was 20 if not for his eyes, which looked like they'd seen far more than 20 years could bear.

"Yes."

The man nodded toward the woman. "Sanna told me you were here." He glanced at the sensor crew. "We should get out of their way. They're tracking a Star Destroyer hovering at system's edge, and they need to keep an eye on it."

Leda followed them out of the sensor alcove and onto the gleaming field of durasteel. The man seemed to gravitate naturally toward a large machine stationed near the entrance to the hangar bay at the edge of a wide tunnel leading to the surface. Although massive and powerful in her eyes, Leda knew that, relatively speaking, it was a gnat against the giants it so often fought.

An X-wing fighter.

"I want to thank you for your help." The man's voice was brisk. "We get a lot of support -- more and more every day -- but it's rare that someone helps us establish a new outpost."

Leda tried to hide her pleasure. "I'm glad I could help. If I can convince the rest of Rabaan to join us, you'll see that once a Rabaanite makes a decision, we stick to it." She swallowed. "But there is one thing you can do in return."

The man's angular face was implacable. "Yes?"

"Save Mika Streev."

The woman, Sanna, glanced quickly at the pilot. He seemed to have been expecting the request. "Leda, we'll do what we can. But you've seen what we've got here: We're nothing more than a tech crew, a few snub fighters, and a freighter. Hardly enough to battle one squad of TIE fighters, let alone a capital ship. We're here to establish our strike base. If the

Empire gets even a whiff of our presence, that's the end of it. Period. So stealth is our key and--" he put his hand on her shoulder -- "and our priority."

"But Mika could help you. He'd be valuable to the Rebellion."

"As I recall, he wasn't very receptive to your hints. Besides," the man said, "even if he were a sworn member of the Alliance, he'd still be expendable. We all are. That's the reality of it. I've lost friends -- " Looking into his eyes, Leda saw some memory stir, and she almost thought she caught a glimpse of starfighters flashing around a distant, gleaming moon-- "Good friends. But it's a risk we take. The important thing is to prevent the war between Rabaan and S'krrr. Your friend Mika will have to save himself."

* * *

Sh'shak of the S'krrr was frozen in place. He did not know how long he'd been that way. He might have known, had he been reciting the mantra of time. But he was not. He was silently reciting the mantra against fear.

Fear touches me like the breath of cold wind. Fear is like cold wind.

Fear is like wind. Fear is like air.

Fear is nothing. Fear touches me like the breath of cold wind. Fear is like cold wind ...

Three meters away, on the other side of a thorn bush, a stormtrooper raised his helmet and drank from a plastic canteen. Sh'shak was close enough to touch the scars on his face.

For all their armor and equipment, stormtroopers moved quietly. Sh'shak, resting in the shade of one of the small brown patches of trees, hadn't sensed their approach until the last minute, and then he had time only to slip into a thorny hedge and freeze in place. The troopers, 10 of them in full white battle armor and unholstered blasters, had stalked through the glade clearly expecting trouble. After scouting the patch of trees, they decided to take advantage of the same shade Sh'shak had sought, and had called a halt. The troopers had unsealed their helmets, wolfed down tasteless gray rations wrapped in plastic, and trampled the thin grass where they sat. After a length of time beyond Sh'shak's comprehension, they had finally reassembled.

The scarred trooper removed his helmet completely. Sh'shak usually had trouble reading the soft, fleshy faces of humans, but this one was all too clearly cruel.

"Insect blood!" the trooper spat. "That's what I'm after. I want to know what color these shell-heads bleed." He nodded toward one of the troopers. "Report."

The trooper held up a datapad. "There's been nothing since the motion detector's last signal 40 minutes ago. He must have gotten wind of our approach and made a run for it. Nothing on thermal."

Sh'shak silently thanked whatever force had made his species cold-blooded.

"Hmmm ... " The scarred man spat. "This place is getting on my nerves. It's hot as fresh bantha fodder. You, Rabaanite!"

A tall Rabaanite stepped out of the shadows. Sh'shak's eyes glittered. He hadn't noticed the human before.

"Yes, Commander Glave?"

"You know these shell-heads better than we do. What's his next move?"

The Rabaanite shook his head. "The S'krrr are a battle-oriented species. But I'd say if he hasn't taken the fight to us by now, he's not going to. Maybe he's gone for permanent cover."

"Let's go."

The stormtroopers and the Rabaanite fanned out with their scanning team in the lead, and disappeared into the trees. Sh'shak remained motionless long after the sounds of their passing had faded. He had nowhere to go, and the little glade seemed safe enough, since the Imperials probably wouldn't check it twice. At least not yet.

In the meantime, he would sit and ponder his recent, irrefutable discovery: the Rabaanites had betrayed S'krrr to the Empire.

* * *

Mika peered over a sharp ridge and into yet another shallow valley. Nothing in sight but a gray dust and more of those stunted brown trees. He stood and trotted down into the glen. The sun was falling toward the horizon now, and he guessed that, with its thin atmosphere, the Combat Moon would grow very cold at night. He needed to find cover.

The little grove offered afternoon shade and a hiding place. As soon as he was under its canopy, he slipped out of his pack and sat down on the ground. He listened carefully, then studied the trees for even the slightest movement. When he was sure no one was around, he lay back in a bower of trampled, flattened grass and closed his eyes.

He opened them immediately. *Flattened grass?*

The movement saved his life. The energy pike whistled past his ear and sank into the ground.

I've been here before, Mika thought, rolling away and to his feet. The energy pike chased him, spinning so fast Mika did not have time to look at his attacker. He registered only vaguely the triangular head of the S'krrr warrior. Then he had to duck again. This time he

wasn't fast enough. The energy pike missed him, but a blade-like forearm scraped his throat, missing his carotid artery by millimeters.

"Wait!" Mika gasped. But the energy pike came around again. No chance to dodge. Mika blocked it with his forearm. Energy leaped from the blade and into his arm, short-circuiting his nerves and paralyzing him from wrist to shoulder. Wincing, he back-pedaled and raised his good arm in a sign of truce.

"Wait!"

The S'krrr took a menacing step forward, its disk-like eyes glittering.

The triangular head swiveled quickly from side to side as it took in a sweeping 360-degree view of its surroundings. Clearly, it considered this a ruse.

"I'm not your enemy," Mika said, aware of the thick irony of his words. "I don't want to kill you."

The S'krrr's mandibles moved thickly as it spoke in heavily accented Basic. "You ask for quarter? That is against the rules of the Combat. Of course, Rabaan has already discarded the Combat ritual." Again, the insectoid stalked forward.

Mika realized that the S'krrr must have encountered the stormtroopers. He thought that Rabaan had sided with the Empire! "No! I came alone! It's the Empire! They're trying to start a war between our planets!"

Sh'shak stopped again. He had thought to kill this Rabaanite quickly. The last thing he had expected was a parley.

"I saw Rabaanites with the stormtroopers."

"You saw one Rabaanite. A tall one with dark hair. He is a traitor." The triangular head cocked to one side in a motion Mika interpreted as interest. "Prove your words."

Carefully Mika unslung his pack. He removed his half of the commnet uplink. "Here. Take it. Call your people. Call anyone. I want to get off this rock as badly as you do."

Mika placed the instrument on the ground and stepped back. The S'krrr stared at him with its unreadable face. Its head dipped toward the uplink, then up at Mika. It seemed to weigh its options.

Sh'shak stepped forward. The uplink looked real. If he could send even a brief message ...

The blaster bolt struck him as he reached for the array. It passed cleanly through him and left a smoking hole in his upper thorax. Sh'shak was hurled backwards and he fell to the ground, writhing as his trembling wings sent up agonized screams in wing-song.

Mika dropped to the ground as angry blaster bolts sizzled overhead. On his hands and knees he scrambled into deeper cover and vanished into the shadows just as stormtroopers came crashing through the trees. A roar filled the air as the two pocket cruisers came into view with the calm finality of a trap well-sprung. Commander Glave strode into the glade, his blaster still warm from its single shot. The Imperial commando planted one booted foot firmly on Sh'shak's delicate wings, pinning the S'krrr to the ground and silencing his screams.

"Stupid shell-head," Glave leaned down and hissed. "I've trapped better than you, believe me!"

Sh'shak's bladed forearms lashed out, but Glave was ready. His foot ground harder into the S'krrr's delicate wings, taking the weight out of the blow. Sh'shak let an agonized sigh out of his mandibles.

"Oh, ho!" the Imperial laughed. "A little life left in our bug, I see. Maybe we should have some fun with him before the deed gets done."

Andos objected. "Commander, he is S'krrr ... we should--"

"Don't tell me what I should do!" Glave snapped. "I'm an officer of the Emperor's stormtroopers! Stand him up!"

Two stormtroopers dragged Sh'shak to his feet, stretching his forearms to either side. Glave grinned and jammed his blaster into the S'krrr's upper thorax, next to the first wound. He pulled the trigger.

* * *

In the sensor alcove, one of the Bothans pulled the headset from his ears and grimaced in horror. He looked at Leda, then at Sanna and the pilot. "It's bad."

"We've got to do something," Leda yelled. "Please!"

Sanna turned to the man and stared at him. Reluctantly, she agreed. "This is too much to take."

The man swallowed. "If we reveal ourselves, this base is finished. All our efforts will have been wasted."

Leda plucked his blaster from its holster. "Maybe I made a mistake. I joined your Rebellion because I thought you fought against things like this. You do what you want. I can't just sit here." She rushed off into the darkness.

* * *

Sh'shak trembled but stayed on his feet. He was trying to recall the mantra against pain, but it seemed to have left his memory, and there was only pain itself. He wondered how long he would live. The scarred one, the commander, put the blaster to his upper thorax again. There was another blaster shot, but oddly, Sh'shak felt nothing. Instead the scarred man stumbled forward with a surprised look on his face, bowling over Sh'shak and both troopers holding him. The scarred trooper's reinforced armor was blackened, but it had held. Ignoring the pain, Sh'shak took advantage of the moment. Pushing the nearest trooper away, he struggled to clear himself of the tangle of arms and legs.

Suddenly two human hands grabbed him and hauled him up. Sh'shak got a quick glimpse of Mika firing a palm-sized blaster point blank at two stormtroopers.

"The... scarred one?" Sh'shak rasped.

"Got away," Mika said. "They'll be back. We need to find cover."

"I'm surprised... you didn't leave me for dead."

Mika pointed to the two blaster holes in Sh'shak's upper chest. "Body cavity in the S'krrr upper thorax. No vital organs, no circulatory function. No serious damage." He winked. "I did my homework."

Sh'shak's head twitched in a S'krrr version of a wince. "But still extremely painful."

A blaster bolt shattered a branch near Mika's head. The stormtroopers had not been driven off for long. Mika dove behind a small thicket and returned fire. Sh'shak grabbed a fallen blaster and joined him. Soon the air was alive with energy bolts.

Mika continued to fire blindly into the trees. "The commnet!" His component lay on the ground where he had placed it. "We need to send a signal."

In answer, Sh'shak dashed from their sparse cover toward the fallen component. Invisible shooters fired at him, but the S'krrr was a blur of motion. He returned to their scant cover with blasters churning up the ground around him.

Sh'shak's voice was disturbingly calm as he began to assemble the uplink. "This is an indefensible position. We will be overrun in moments."

"Not if I can help it."

The S'krrr and the Rabaanite both looked up, startled. Leda Kyss had materialized from nowhere.

"Leda!" Mika grabbed her like a man clutching a dream. Sh'shak lowered his weapon. "Leda, what are you doing here!"

"Long story," she said. "Run!"

Blaster bolts started to crash around them, but most of them struck the thick, stunted trees that shielded them. Half-blind, Mika and the wounded S'krrr followed Leda through the trees that covered their retreat.

In moments, their protection ended. From the forest edge they could see a large cave mouth only a hundred meters away -- but it was a hundred meters of flat terrain.

"Run!" Leda ordered.

Together, they dashed across the open ground. They had outdistanced their pursuers, and when they were halfway across Mika thought they would make it to the cave mouth. Then a loud whine filled his ears, and a shadow blotted out the sun.

"Cruiser!" he warned. He leaped to one side as Sh'shak and Leda leaped to the other. Turbolaser fire peppered the ground between them.

"The uplink!" Mika screamed. "Finish it!"

Sh'shak scrambled to complete the connections. "Done!" he hissed.

Then the three warriors watched, horrified, as the pocket cruiser settled gently on its repulsorlift engines between them and the cave mouth.

* * *

In the sensor alcove, a signal bleeped. One of the Bothans checked his instruments.

"Uplink signal," he said. "But it's being jammed. It won't get offplanet."

The tall angular man felt all eyes on him. The Givin seemed to be calculating his possible responses. The two Bothans waited impassively. Sanna stood next to him and put a hand on his shoulder.

He looked back at her and nodded.

* * *

The airborne cruiser continued to circle the area, forming a perimeter, as the door to the stationary vehicle opened. Six stormtroopers stepped out. Then Commander Glave. Then Andos. "Weapons!" Glave bellowed.

Mika, Leda, and Sh'shak tossed their blasters to the side. Keeping their distance, troopers gathered them up.

"All of them!" the commando roared.

Mika unstrapped his Ibarsi knife, and Sh'shak unhooked his energy pike from his wounded body. Leda raised her hands to indicate she was now unarmed.

"Well, well!" Glave said. A grin wrinkled his scarred face even further. "You've led us quite a chase, and turned a simple mission into a waste of my time!"

"You're too late!" Mika yelled. "We've already sent a signal to S'krrr! They'll be here before you can cover up the evidence!"

Glave shook his head. "No signal has left this planet. Shout all you want-- there's no one to hear."

As he spoke, the ground began to tremble. A roar came from behind him, and Glave turned to see the cave mouth flicker with light, as though a dragon lay hidden within. The roar and the light grew, and a blast of hot air struck them. With a triumphant scream, a dragon that was no dragon burst from the cave and hurled itself skyward.

An X-wing fighter.

The ship became a point of light rising up into the blue sky, then it turned with impossible agility back toward toward the surface. The airborne cruiser turned sluggishly to meet it. Both ships fired as they passed in opposite directions. The cruiser missed. The X-wing didn't. Four streaks of light pierced the other ship's shields, and the pocket cruiser vanished in a ball of fire.

On the ground, both sides watched in utter amazement. Commander Glave was the first to react. He slapped the nearest stormtrooper on the back.

"The Rebel outpost!" he shouted. "It was under our noses all the time! Get inside and signal *Coercion*!"

The trooper dashed for the cruiser.

He never made it. A blaster bolt punctured his armor at the weak neck joint and he fell like a rag doll.

Sh'shak had taken the opportunity to draw his hidden blaster. His shot was answered by others -- not from the stormtroopers, but from the cave. Sanna and the two Bothans charged. Confused by blaster fire from two directions when they had expected it from none, the troopers dove for cover on the uneven ground. Ignoring the new threat,

Commander Glave fired at Sh'shak as the S'krrr took aim on him. Distracted by the S'krrr's weapon, Glave fired directly at it -- the shot blew the hold-out blaster from Sh'shak's hand. This time, Glave took more careful aim.

"No!" Mika and Leda shouted as one.

* * *

Mika dove for his Ibarsi knife. In one motion he rolled forward and grabbed the weapon. Coming up he unsheathed it smoothly and hurled it forward. The weapon cut the air, then passed cleanly through the commando's arm just above the wrist.

Too slow.

Glave had already fired. Mika turned to see that the blaster had struck... Leda.

While Mika attacked, Leda had thrown herself between the Imperial and the wounded S'krrr.

"No!" Mika screamed. He rushed forward with tears in his eyes.

He did not see Glave, ignoring his own wound, track the X-wing coming around for another attack. He did not hear the Imperial bellow a retreat, then slip into the waiting pocket cruiser with Andos close behind.

"Leda!" he dropped to his knees next to her. "Leda!"

* * *

She was surprised when the blaster bolt struck her and she felt no pain. But her jaw no longer worked. She looked at Mika, trying to invest in that look all her belief in her actions, her devotion to her cause, and most of all her words of love for him. Then she seemed to fall a second time. White light passed through her body, and two gentle hands caught her as she fell. She closed her eyes, and never opened them again. Mika let out a piercing, wordless wail.

Next to him, Sh'shak's face was impassive. There were no words of parting in his language, only the gentle flutter of the wings of memory.

* * *

The X-wing kicked up dust as it settled on its repulsorlift cushion, its ion engines growling impatiently. The angular-faced pilot leaped from the cockpit and in a few seconds he had covered the distance to the small crowd of mourners.

Mika held Leda's body in his arms. He looked at the newcomer as if hoping the pilot could save him a second time.

The pilot choked. "She... was very brave."

Mika sobbed. "She was a Rabaanite warrior."

The pilot turned to Sanna. "We have to evacuate." The Imperial ship launched the second her people were aboard. He had given pursuit, but the Imperial commander had been too smart to engage him. Shutting down his weapons and shunting all power to his shields, the pocket cruiser had weathered a blistering assault from his X-wing's lasers as it fled into space. With the Star Destroyer looming out there somewhere, he had dared pursue them only so far.

"The Bothans are jamming them," he explained to Sanna. "But they'll be out of range in seconds. So much for this base."

Sanna smiled sadly. "I didn't think you'd give in."

The pilot shrugged. He looked at Sh'shak, then at Leda. "She was right. This is what we're supposed to fight against. Let's go."

In moments the Rebels had returned to their cave and were wheeling their equipment onto a small freighter. After a few minutes, Mika and Sh'shak appeared.

The Rebel pilot stopped his work.

"We buried her," Mika said. "I thought it best to leave her behind."

"I'm sorry."

Mika's face hardened. "You say the Empire will be here soon?"

"Any minute."

"I want to leave something else behind, too."

* * *

An hour later, a swarm of TIE bombers screamed across the moon's thin sky as AT-ATs pulverized the ground beneath, giving cover to the assault team that broke into the subterranean cave. They found nothing but an open cavern with a floor made of shining durasteel, and a small, empty alcove.

Governor Klime marched into the cavern with Commander Glave and Andos at his heel. Where the commander's right hand had been, a chrome-sheathed bio-cap was in place,

holding the wound in stasis until a bionic hand could be readied. The pain must have been tremendous, but Glave ignored it.

Klime's voice echoed loudly in all corners of the cavern. "Nothing?"

"Nothing, sir," Glave growled. "It must have been a small operation for them to get out so fast. I take responsibility for their escape, sir."

Governor Klime opened his hands wide. "Not to worry, commander. We must remain philosophical and flexible. Our original plan was thwarted, but we will make adjustments. We can no longer cause a war between S'krrr and Rabaan. But we will use this Rebel base as an excuse to garrison the system." Klime turned to Andos. "You will voice your public approval of the Empire's presence." It was not a question. "For your support, you will be rewarded with a high place in the reorganized governmentt."

Andos gave a tight smile and a nod. "Yes, sir."

Klime tightened both hands into fists. "Gentlemen, the ultimate goal was to bring this system into a tighter grip without these idiotic abos putting up a fight. That goal will still be achieved."

"Sir, we found something!" a stormtrooper called out from the nearby alcove.

A technician examined the item and brought it to Governor Klime. It was a small device made up of two 'pieces. A small light in the control panel indicated that it had been activated. The technician swallowed. "It's a commnet uplink, sir. It's been activated and... I think it's broadcasting on two frequencies."

Governor Klime's mouth tightened. "Are you telling me ... ?"

"Yes, sir," the technician replied. "Someone's been listening to every word we've said."

* * *

Somewhere in the empty reaches of space, a nondescript freighter and a single X-wing fighter ripped through an invisible barrier and returned to realspace.

Mika had rarely been to the stars, and he had never been outside the system. But he ignored the wondrous emptiness around him. Through a viewport, he could see the X-wing hanging in the void as he and Sh'shak listened on a headset.

"We'll have to wait a short while," the X-wing pilot was saying, "but we can probably slip you back onto your home planets without much trouble. From there, you're on your own."

"I'm not going home," Mika said simply. The speaker crackled.

"You're welcome to join the Rebellion... "

"I will join you," Mika said. "But first I need to see justice done. I need to find Andos, and that Imperial commando." In the viewport glass, his reflection hardened. "That's something I have to do alone."

"Not alone." Sh'shak's wings rustled. "I owe you my life. And I owe her. I will come with you, if you will have me."

Mika nodded.

"Then we'll take you to our rendezvous point, and arrange transportation to the nearest port." The pilot addressed the freighter's helm. "Okay, Sanna, let's go."

Both ships pointed their bows away from the void, toward the distant gleam of stars. As they arced gracefully out of the darkness, they seemed to leave in their wake a whisper of sorrow, and the quiet rustle of wings.

From: Dr. Tobias, Analysis: Tech
To: Hyndis Kogler, Bureau: Infiltration
Subject: Superior Utilization of 3PO Human-Cyborg Relations Droids
Confirmed: SEND; TRAN9/9; RECV
Context: 4E16; AOPT; ASYS; ROPT;
Phasecycle: PSEG388893131; ICON;
02.00BMUT; 01.00RMUT

Hyndis,

I am dismayed that you have not seen fit to reply to my request of an evaluation of our scheme for using 3PO Human-Cyborg Relations Droids for infiltration of enemy facilities. In order to refresh your memory of my previous communication, I herein summarize my important points:

1. 3PO droids are nearly universal. They could be inserted virtually unnoticed into any Rebel camp, having unquestioned access to most areas. The Rebels would never suspect

such a low-cost piece of hardware as being an integral part of Imperial Intelligence.

2. Dr. Lucien guarantees me that only minor modifications are necessary to a 3PO's already impressive array of sensors in order to make it a first-class intelligence-gathering droid, costing thousands less than the Akrayd Viper Probe Droid.

3. A 3PO unit has built-in hardware, the TranLang III Communications module, which allows it to speak millions of languages. Given that the Rebellion recruits scum from anywhere they can find it, a facile ability with a great many tongues could be a significant advantage, allowing a few 3POs to replace hundreds of less linguistically adept agents. Just think of the savings to the New Order!

4. I can arrange for an impressive demonstration for you if you would like. I am sure the results would surprise you.

From: Hyndis Kogler, Bureau: Infiltration
To: Dr. Tobias, Analysis: Tech
Subject: Your Droid Scheme
Confirmed: SEND; TRAN9/9; RECV
Context: 5E13; AOPT; DSYS; ROPT;
Phasecycle: PSEG 7519285763950326; LINE;
00.06BMUT; 00.15RMUT

Dr. Tobias,

I have received all of your communications on the use of 3PO droids for infiltration. We have given it a great deal of consideration. I am responding in sufficient detail to each of your points that you might understand our point of view.

1. 3PO droids are indeed nearly universal throughout the galaxy, being one of the 20 most popular droid models of all time, with more still being produced. This means that if the Rebels have any need for a 3PO, they could have easily picked up whatever quantity they need. We suspect their need is minimal. As for the ease of infiltration, the most difficult thing about infiltrating the Rebels is finding some Rebels to infiltrate. Our agents have to be in place for months or years before getting a chance to join the Rebel Alliance. We cannot just ship 3POs to them.

Additionally, it is easier to scan droids than living beings, as droids are still simpler constructs and they are far more uniform than any single species in the Empire.

2. I have seen Dr. Lucien's modifications. The dedicated energy receptor (DER) is covered with a translucent membrane which from certain angles gives the 3PO the appearance of a third eye, something which will undoubtedly raise suspicions among observant Rebels.

3. I am sure the Ubiquitorate appreciates your efforts to save the New Order a few credits by replacing agents with droids. I certainly do not appreciate the prospect of being replaced by some

mobile garbage compactor from Astromech or Cybot Galactica. I feel Infiltration is best staffed by beings rather than droids; we are still more effective than any droid yet invented.

4. All of this can be summed up by our response to your last point.

Read this part carefully, Tobias. I am extremely angry over your demonstration. On Stensen's Colony there are Ghothian slime pools which display a greater degree of intelligence than you did when you initiated this project.

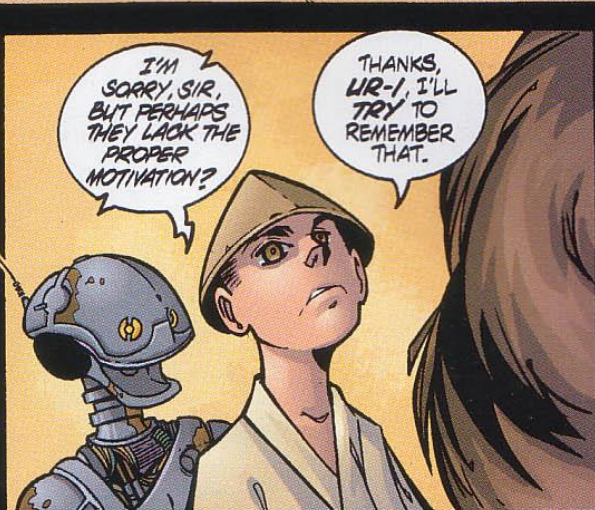
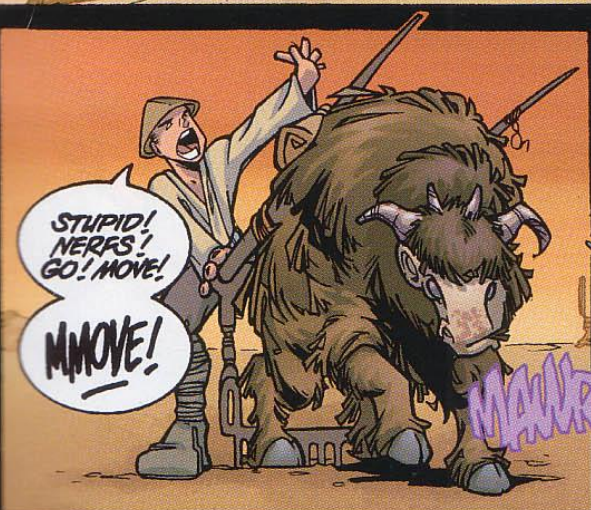
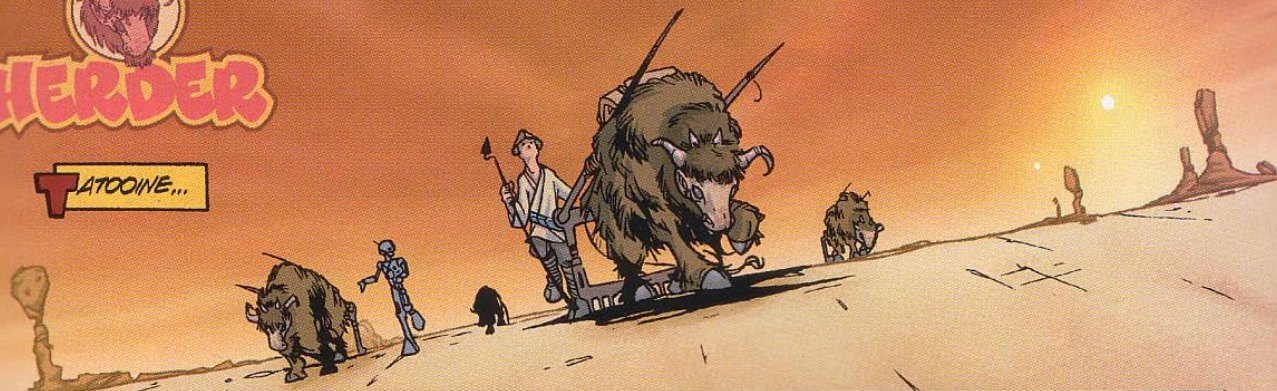
I was scanning by my terminal when the security system notified me that a droid with an improperly coded ID chip had entered the perimeter office a split second before. I notified IntSec personnel and then grabbed a few men from Infiltration to try and head it off before it reached any sensitive areas within the office. As I rounded the corner I spotted a 3PO waddling casually toward a sector office. It was then that I spotted Dr. Lucien's modification. Your droid had time to say, "Oh dear, there must be some mistake," before we blasted its legs off. Satisfied that the droid had no weaponry, we interrogated it. I have had no more than the standard course on interrogation given by your bureau, but I had the 3PO spilling its chips before I had bolstered my blaster.

Cute idea, trying to insert a 3PO into Infiltration. It was a stupid idea having the 3PO transmit its findings directly to your office for two reasons. First, any unsecured transmissions in our office will be detected — not *might* be, *will* be. Second, for direct transmission you had to give the droid exact coordinates to your office. If we hadn't known where your office was, we would now.

So Tobias, it was a stupid idea to send those eight other 3POs out to find Rebel bases to infiltrate. The Bureau has managed to recover seven of them, but one of them is still out there. If we don't find that last droid before the Rebels do, you may get a close up opportunity to see how Rebel equipment works.

NERF HERDER

TATOOINE...



LATER, AT
MOS ZABU...

HEY,
DOMO! DOMO
JONES!

BLERX!
YOU OL'
SNART
HANDLER!
WHAT'S IT
BEEN?

AGES!
STILL WORKING
YOUR UNCLE
NOBU'S NERF
RANCH?

DIDN'T
YOU WANT TO BE
A FIGHTER
PILOT? SAME
OL' DOMO! HAH!

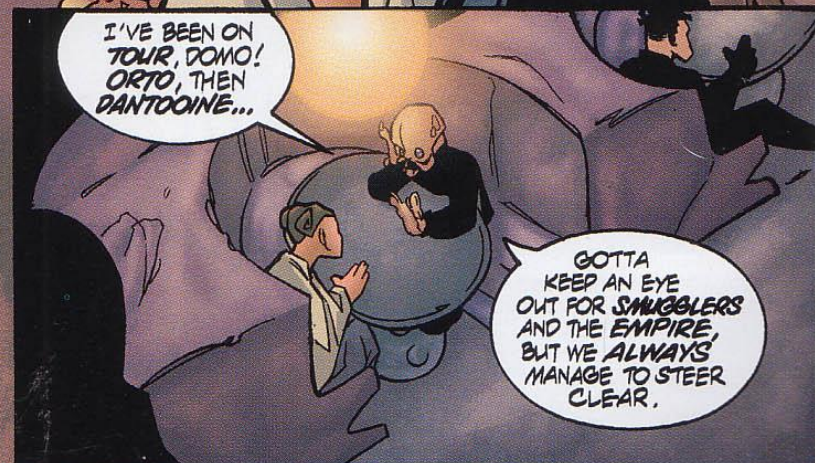
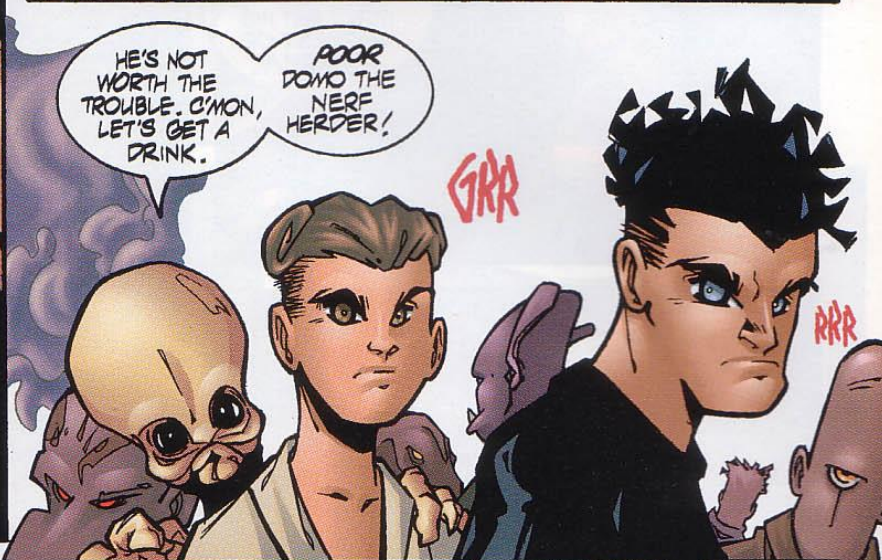
DOMO...
JILLJOO JAB
IS WORKIN'
T'NIGHT.

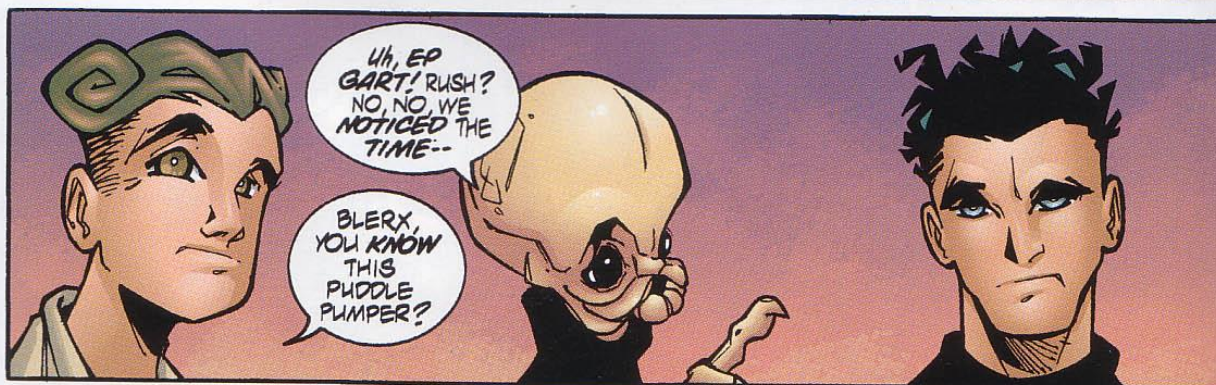
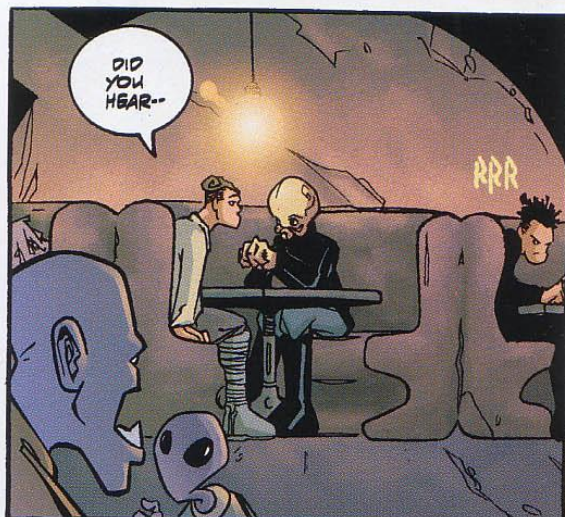
YEAH?

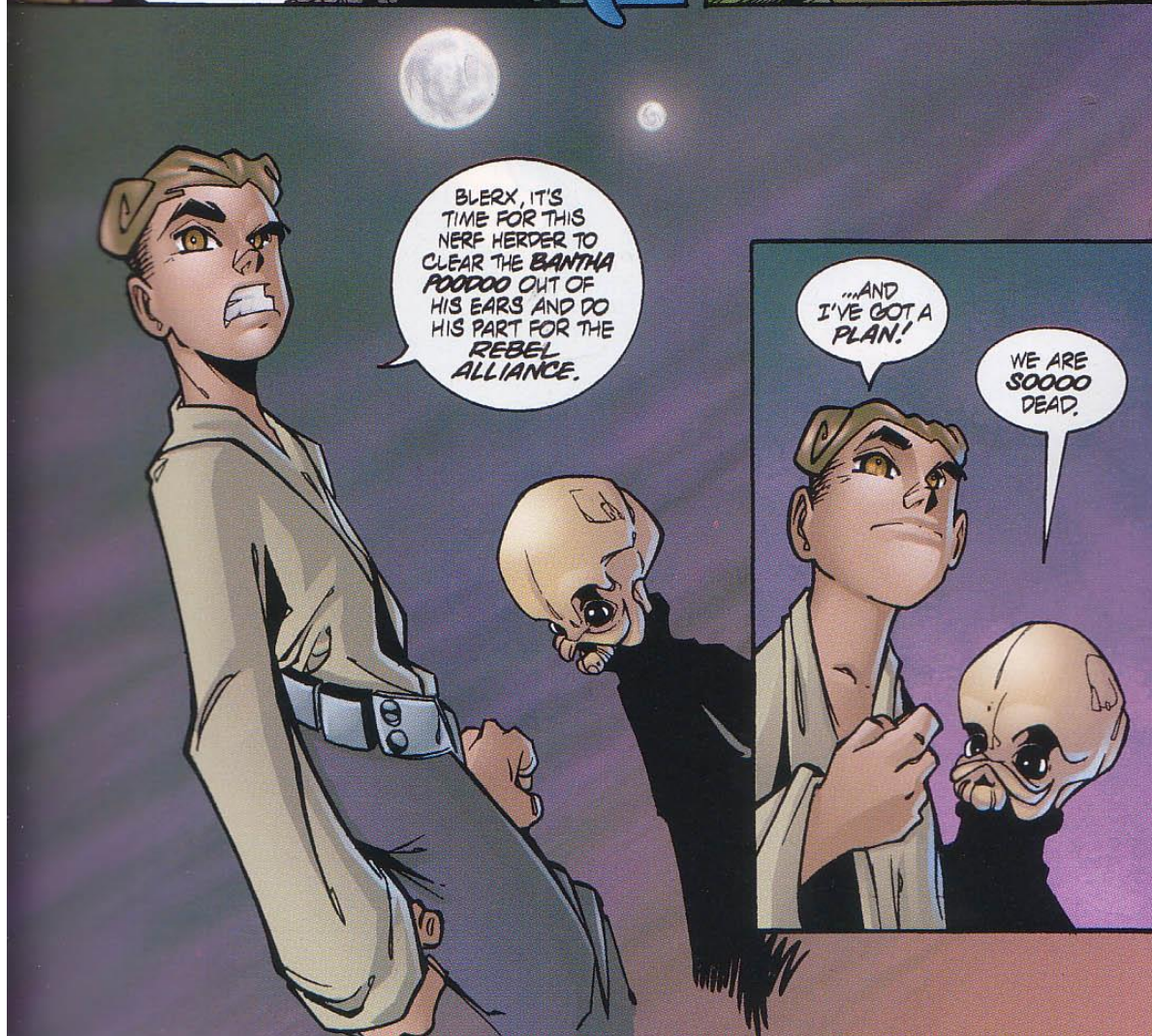
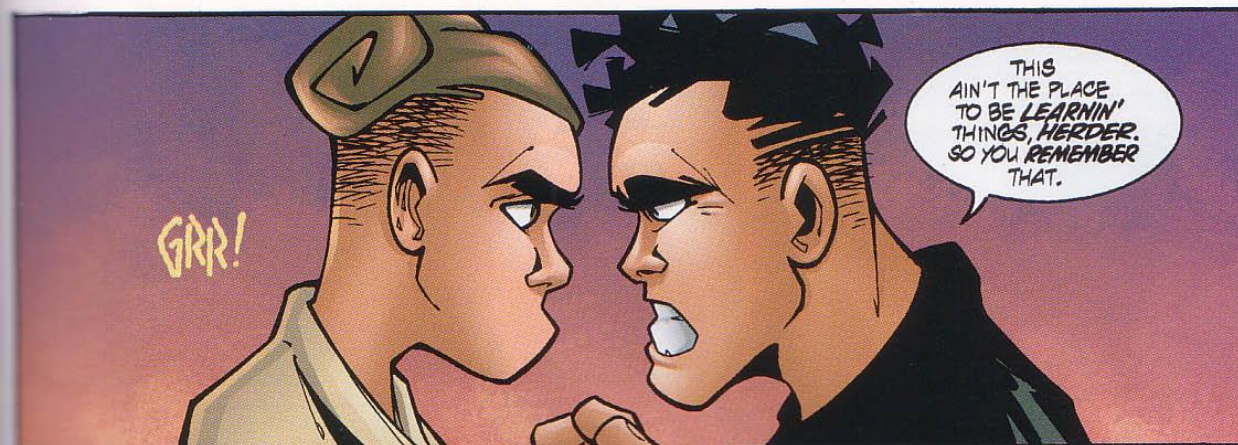
RRRROO!

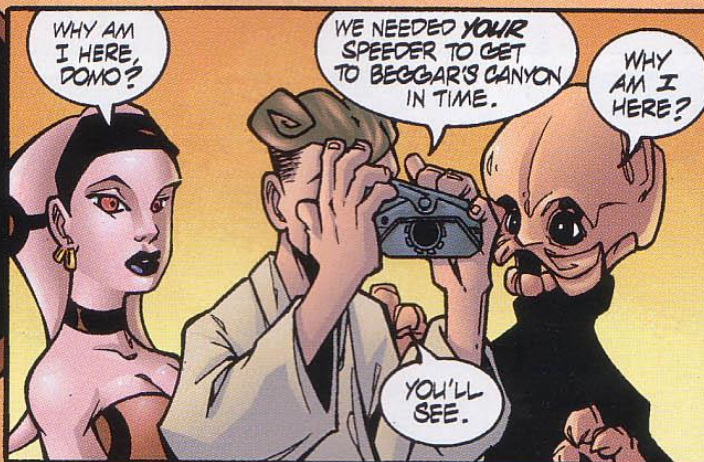
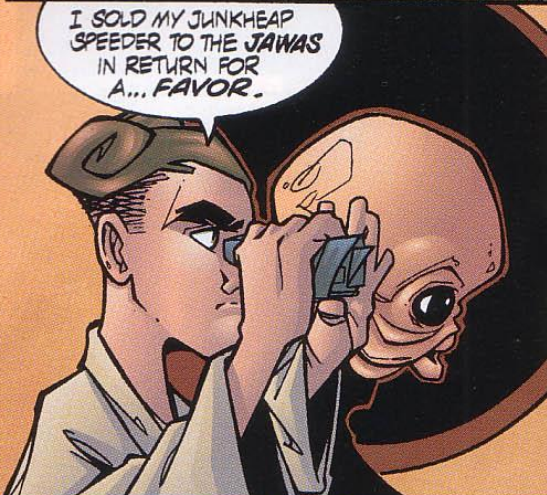
HIYA,
JILL--uh,
JILLJOO--
er--

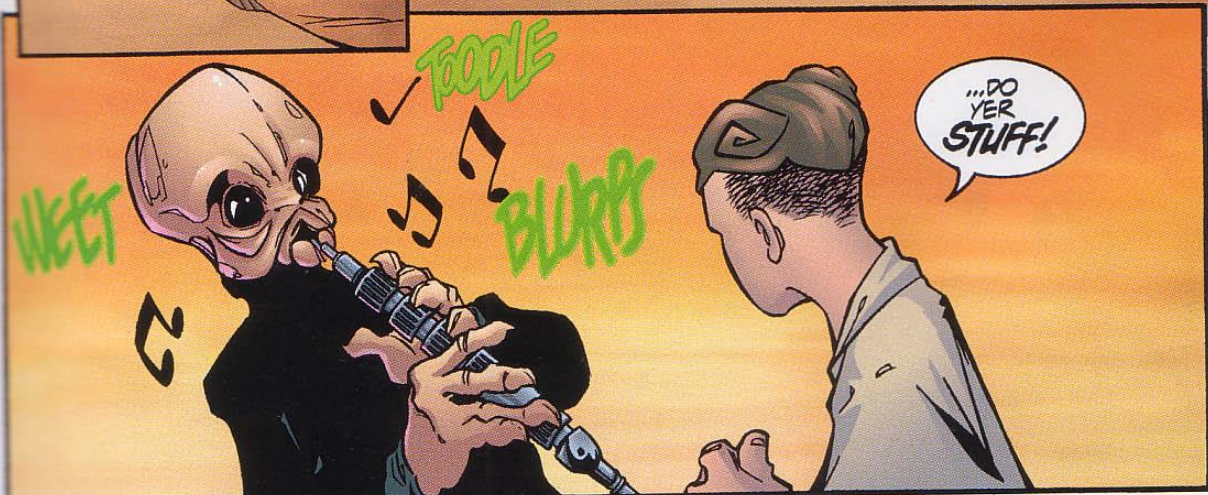
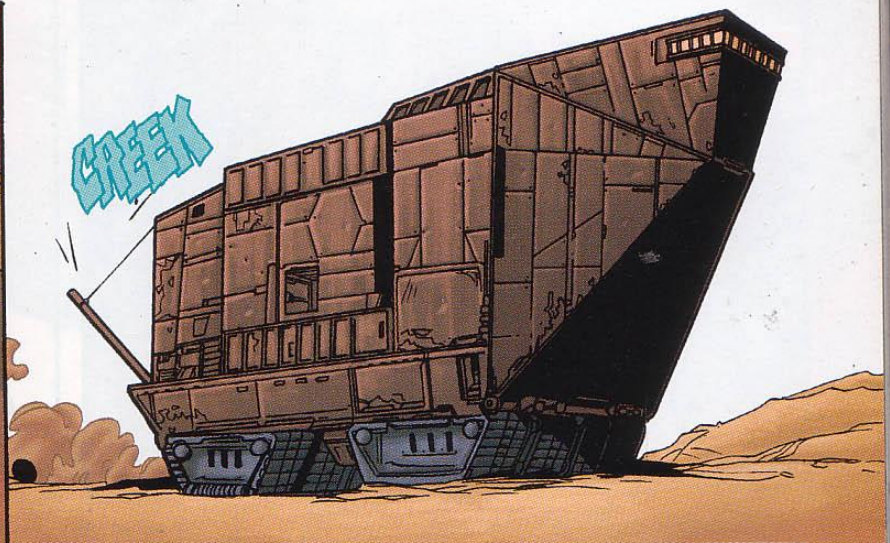
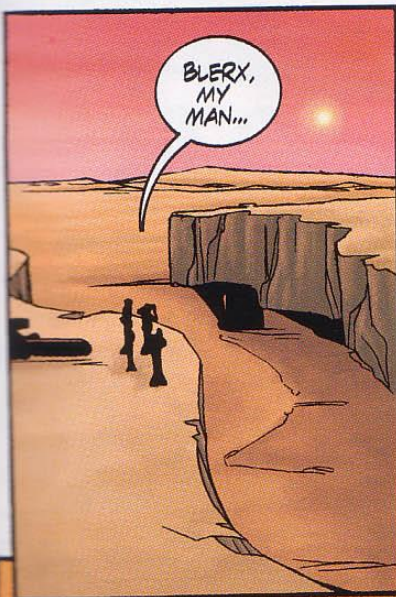
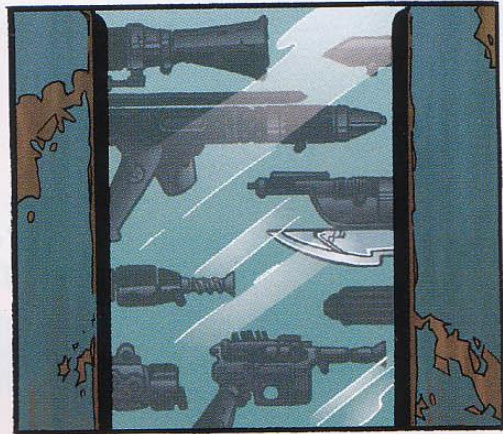
HAH!
DOMO, DON'T
YOU EVER
GIVE UP?

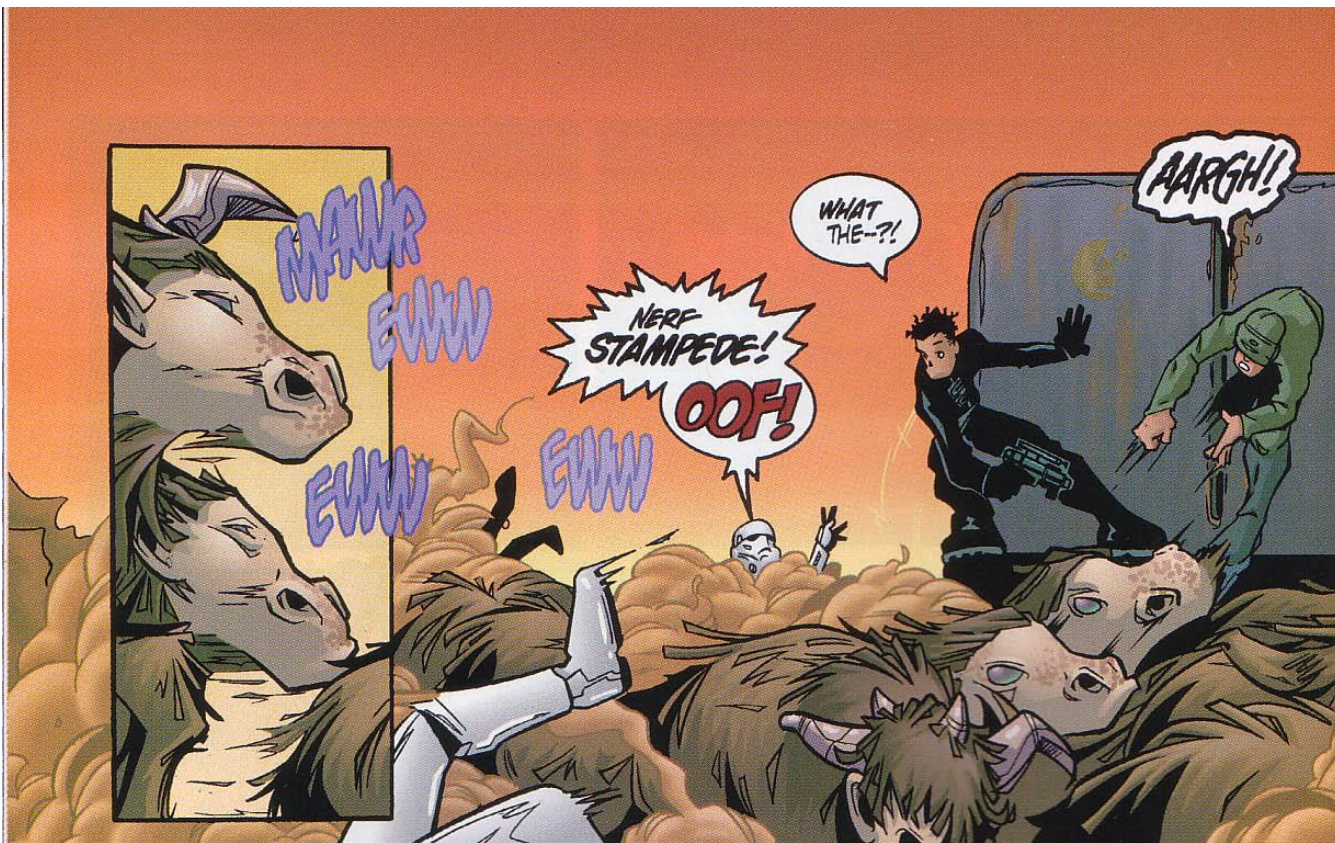










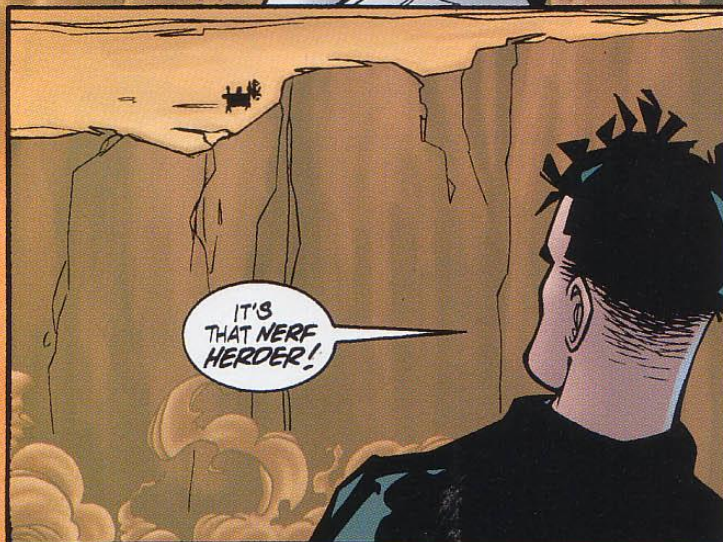


MAWR
EWWW
EWWW
EWWW

NERF
STAMPEDE!
OOF!

WHAT
THE--?!

AARGH!

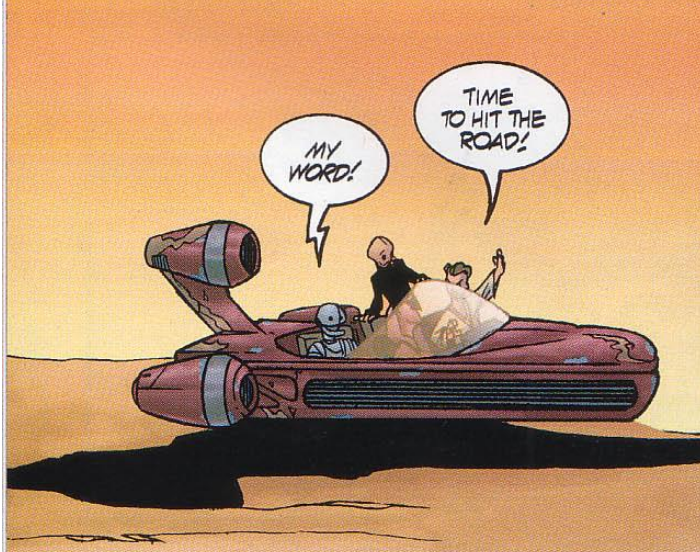


IT'S
THAT NERF
HERDER!



UH-
OH!

HE
SPOTTED
US!



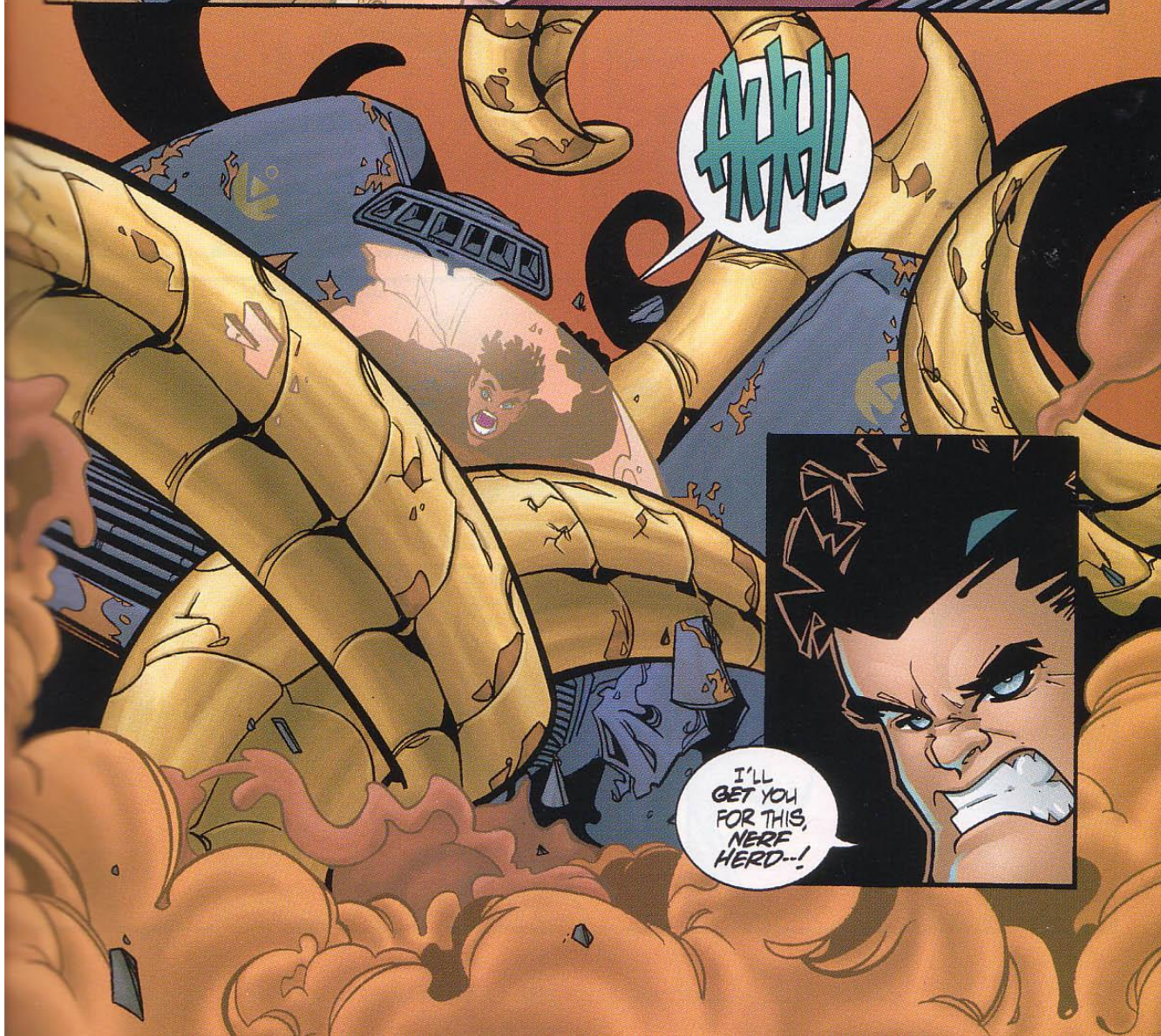
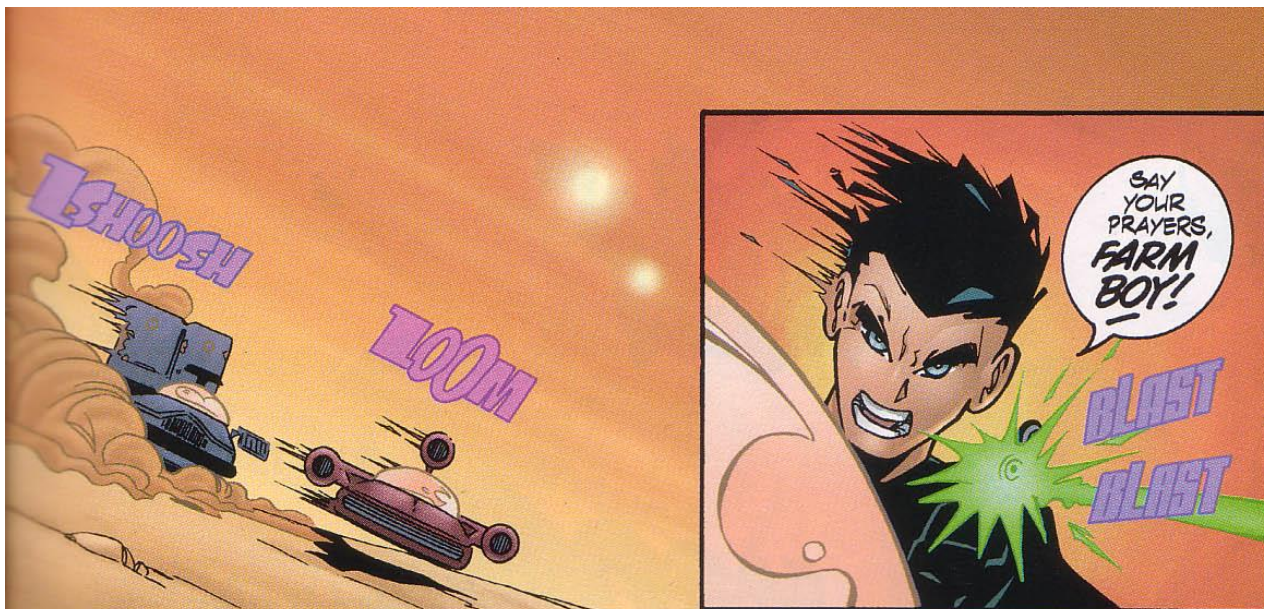
MY
WORD!

TIME
TO HIT THE
ROAD!



DON'T WORRY, JILLJO!
I KNOW THE DESERT LIKE
THE BACK OF MY HAND!
WE'LL LOSE 'EM! I'VE
LIVED HERE MY WHOLE
LIFE.

LUCKY
YOU. YOU'RE
GONNA GET
TO DIE HERE,
TOO.



DynaCorp Refinery Blasted by Rebel Terrorists

Grande Hyet, Esseles

The small polar island of Grande Hyet was rocked yesterday by an explosion that utterly destroyed the major fuel depot and refinery located there, and caused major damage to the local spaceport. The explosion, which occurred at the same time as another attack on the Imperial installation at Tralee, is being attributed to the Rebel terrorist group known as the Faceless, which recently made its presence known here on Esseles.

With more than 50 dead and 250 injured, as well as an estimated 50 million credits in property damage, the strike ranks as the worst atrocity to hit Esseles since the Algeran Faction attacks during Emperor Palpatine's ascension to the throne.

Rumors in the Hall suggest that the delay in response to the disaster was caused by a quibble between Hall President Ralle and Governor Takel as to who had the right to send troops into the area. Takel ended the argument by sending in a detachment of Imperial Navy troopers from the Destroyer *Indomitable*, and air cover from Tralee Naval Base. Ralle is reportedly seeking more latitude in moving Esselian troops without Imperial interference.

Darpa SectorNet

Ralle Urges Calm in Aftermath

Camalar, Esseles

President Ralle took to the newsnets today in an attempt to assure citizens that their lives are not in danger, and that the Rebel terrorist presence on Esseles is being investigated. "I want to let everyone know that the disasters that occurred at Grande Hyet and Tralee will not be repeated. Security is being upgraded at all levels, and orbital movements will be watched." His announcement was deemed necessary to calm the populace, and halt the increasing flight of offworld business.

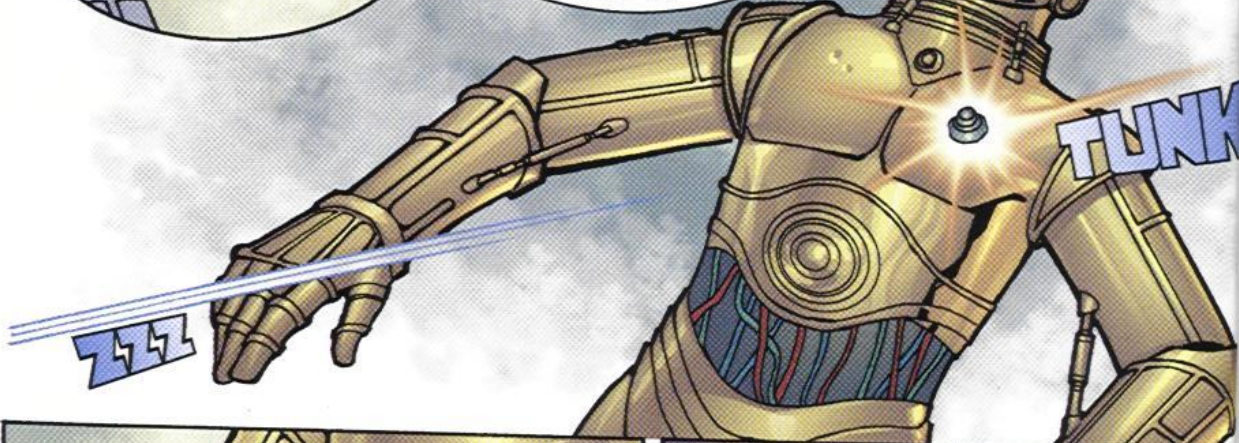
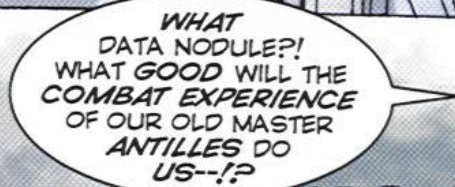
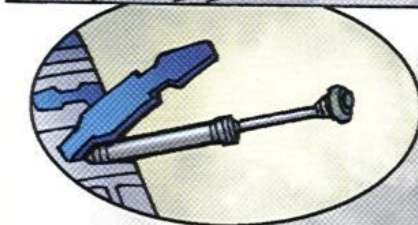
The recent activities by the Faceless are expected to have a tangible negative impact on the business cycle this quarter. DynaCorp's stock took a dive today as speculators anticipated a major loss this quarter as a result of the Grande Hyet disaster. Timour Lines, a major fuel hauler, also lost ground today at the destruction of its fueling depot and freight contract.

The fabricated broadcast the Faceless put on the air during the governmental address will likely have damaging effects on industry as well. The broadcast, which made hysterical charges of anti-alien bias on the part of the government, has nonetheless succeeded in alarming the more gullible of Esseles' offworlder residents. The spaceports were clogged today as aliens of all sorts attempted to purchase seats on spaceliners, and alien labor chiefs are urging their members to go on strike. Today, the factories of such industrial giants as Sendarl Electronics and MeraStel fell silent as workers walked off the job. "At least the droids can't walk," quipped one foreman, "they're bolted to the floor."

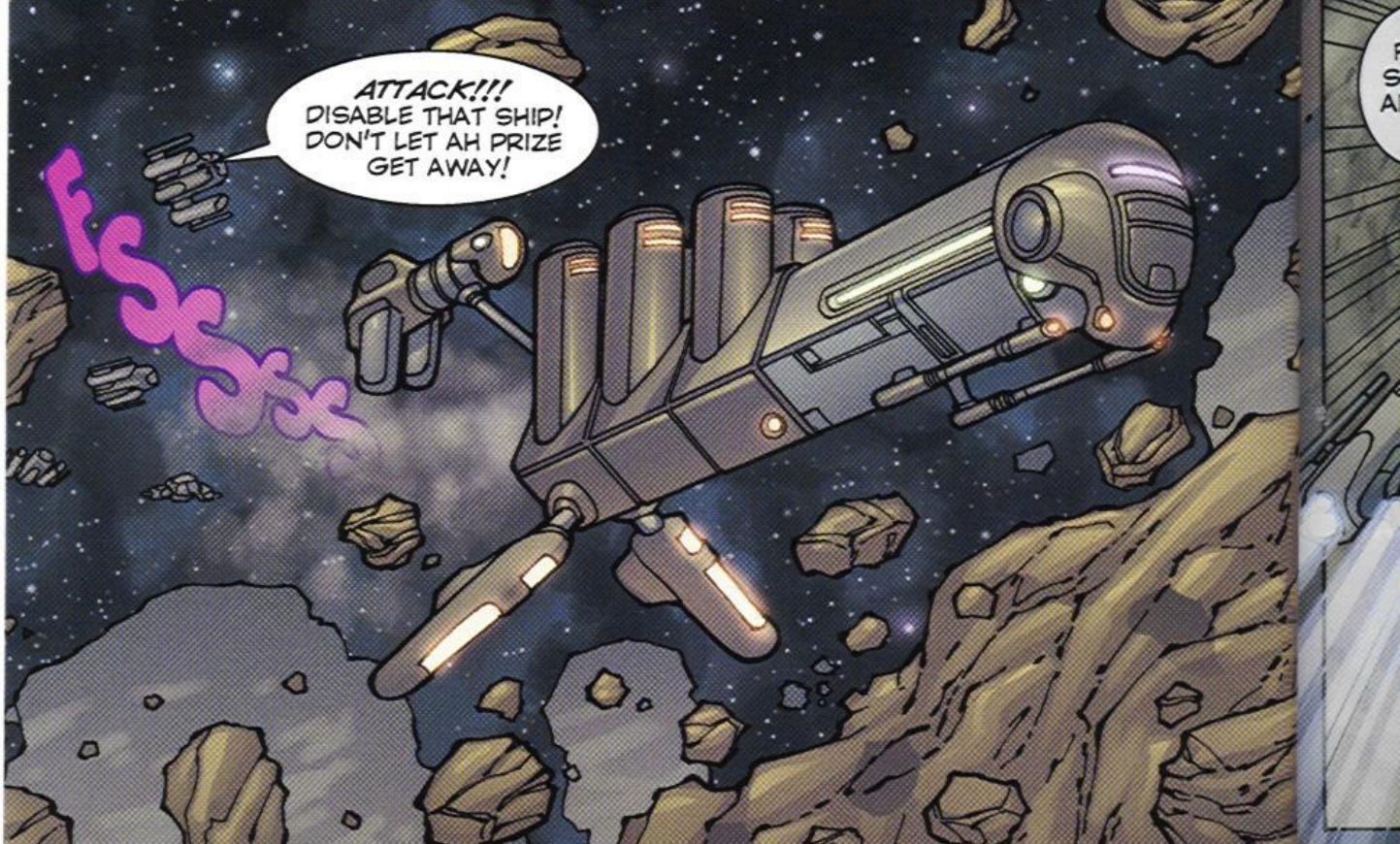
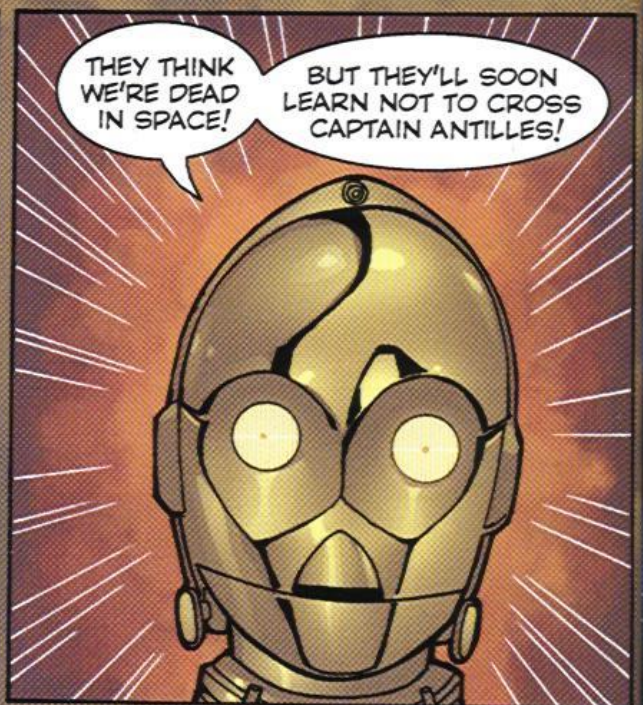
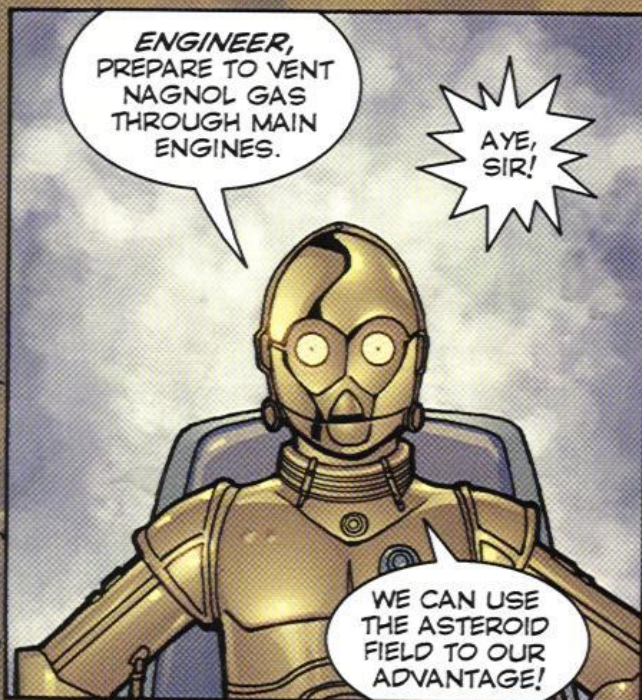
Darpa SectorNet

A REBEL FREIGHTER ON A SECRET MISSION TO THE PLANET LADRO IS SUDDENLY SWARMED BY AN ENEMY ATTACK. LIFE SUPPORT, LOST. CREW, DEAD. MISSION, DOOMED... OR IS IT?



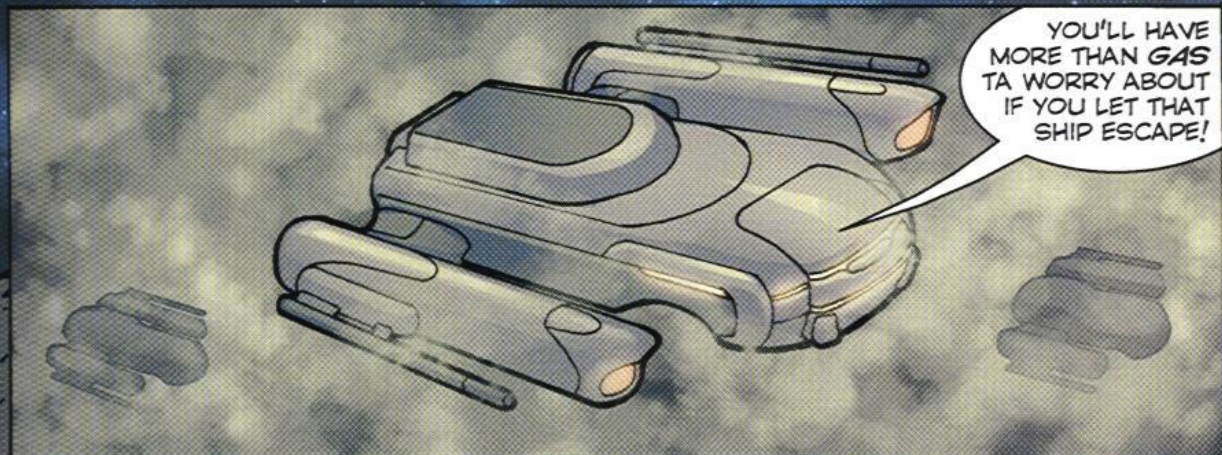








WHAT'S THAT GAS
THEY'RE VENTING?!
IT'S PLAYING HAVOC
WITH AH SENSORS!



YOU'LL HAVE
MORE THAN *GAS*
TA WORRY ABOUT
IF YOU LET THAT
SHIP ESCAPE!



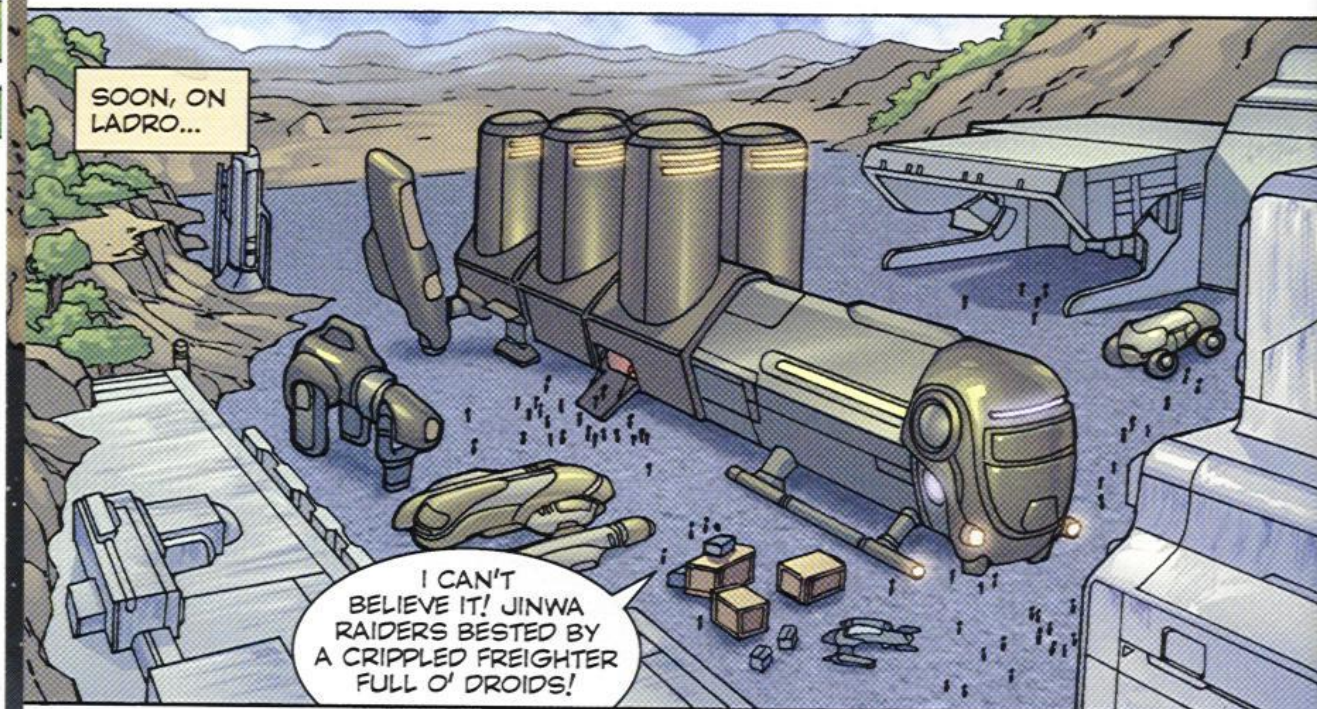
FULL
SPEED
AHEAD!

EH?
WHAT'S
THAT IN
FRONT OF
US?! NO,
IT CAN'T
BE...



...ASTEROID!!!





END

Alien Workers Reach Accord with the Hall

Camalar, Esseles

President Ralle and Kanno Sebak, the Sullustan representative of the Guild of Offworlder Skilled Laborers (GOSL), met in the Hall yesterday to renew vows of support and friendship. GOSL had ordered its workers to boycott their workplaces following the fabricated but convincing broadcasts aired by an anti-Empire fringe group.

Ralle announced at the talks that a task force would be appointed to look into anti-alien bias in the workplace, and that special scholarships to Camalar University would be offered for the deserving young of immigrant workers.

Sebak graciously received this generous gesture from Ralle, and announced that he was satisfied by the conclusions of the Hall report which had investigated the Grande Hyet disaster. "The leadership of GOSL hereby acknowledges and affirms that the tragic disaster witnessed by Grande Hyet, in which 146 offworlders lost their lives, was caused in whole by the dastardly and dangerous terrorist group known as the Faceless," Sebak declared in an impromptu speech on the steps of the Hall. "We would like to express our appreciation for the President's support and understanding in these difficult times, and request that all GOSL members and sympathizers return to work as soon as possible. Esseles welcomes us yet."

Esselian New Order Party head Jamson Freller echoed the President's sentiment. "Certainly, while the ENO party wonders whether alien residents have much to offer our society, we are outraged by the attempt of Rebel sympathizers and terrorists to turn us against them, and them against us." Freller, about to face Ralle in the upcoming elections, did question Ralle's motivations. "I do wonder at the newfound warm feeling the President has for alien migrant workers. It can't have anything to do with the upcoming elections, of course."

Darpa SectorNet

37:2:11/GNS/923E/RAL.3.DEM/MIL

Graeber Cracks Rebel Spy Ring on Ralltiir

Demilla City, Ralltiir

Governor Graeber seized over 300 tons of weaponry in an early morning raid of a secret Rebel armory located in the center of Salibury's commercial sector. The authorities also captured 35 Rebel terrorists and spies on the site, and are in the process of apprehending another hundred or so through interrogations and by examining documents seized during the raid.

The largest crackdown on underground agitators since the Imperial invasion nearly two years ago, the raid took three weeks to plan, and involved the security forces of four counties, as well as Imperial military units detached from the governor's garrison.

Galaxy News Service

37:2:21/TRI/H5YT/GRO.5.GRO/ECO

Taxes Rise in Outer Systems

Grovner, Ord Grovner

Imperial economic advisor Pinac Galous announced a 15 percent increase in consumption taxes, to apply to all Outer Rim Territory world citizens retroactive through the beginning of the year. He cited rising rawmat costs and increasing Rebel attacks as justification for the increase.

The news has not been met with enthusiasm in the Outer Rim. Many leaders here are asking why they alone must bear the burden of increased taxes. Perhaps anticipating this question, Galous stated in his report that since the brunt of Rebel terrorist attacks are originating in the Outer Rim, that region must bear the brunt of taxes raised to allow the Imperial military to respond to these threats. He pointed out that proportionally, the Mid-Rim and Colonies have very little Rebel activity, and the Core virtually none (despite recent embarrassing events on Esseles).

He also noted that other isolated regions such as Hutt space, the CSA, and the Tion Hegemony all provide their own security forces and do not require the close Imperial supervision that the Outer Rim Territories do.

The increased revenue is to go toward funding unspecified military projects, Galous said.

TriNebulon News

Customs Uncovers Rawmat Smuggling

Votrad, Brentaal

Imperial Customs investigators uncovered evidence of a smuggling scheme believed responsible for re-directing rawmats routed through Brentaal starport to unknown secondary sources in the Outer Rim Territories.

According to Brentaal Imperial Customs Captain Dalea Trovin, who coordinated the investigation, Imperial Customs officers raided a warehouse complex in Brentaal starport's Votrad sector yesterday. The customs security forces found thousands of tons of rawmats listed as missing or misrouted in official datafiles. No arrests were made, as the warehouse was undefended and void of inhabitants — investigators are still searching for those involved.

After tracing registry and lot numbers on the materials, customs followed a trail of shipments misdirected from mining transports and corporate freighters through several different shipping companies and even a Brentaal trade guild. Apparently the smugglers have been slicing into corporate and Imperial Customs computers, changing routing numbers and altering freighter manifests so the rawmats would be delivered into their hands.

Captain Trovin believes the rawmats uncovered yesterday were the latest in a series of materials shipments to be stored in the warehouse. Although computer records could not pinpoint where these shipments have been going, Trovin suspects they were shipped to the Outer Rim, currently experiencing a shortage of rawmats. She vowed to find the culprits and end their operation. "These rawmat smugglers are hindering the Empire's efforts to better the lives of all Imperial citizens and defeat Rebel terrorists," Captain Trovin said. "We'll do everything we can to shut them down."

Brentaal Trade News

Rebels on Fremond III Surrender

Camaa, Fremond III

A three-day-long siege came to an end yesterday morning when a group of Rebel provocateurs holed up in a Camaa warehouse complex surrendered to Imperial forces. "It might have been a nasty business," said Rumo Takashi, the commander of the troopers who surrounded the complex. "The warehouses were fortified some time before, obviously in preparation for such an event as this. If they hadn't surrendered, we might have lost a lot of lives storming the place."

The Rebels retreated to the complex after being caught in an attempt to infiltrate Prefect Glaffold's government offices. It is not yet known whether they escaped with anything of strategic value, though according to police sources, state surveillance systems detected several transmissions being beamed from the warehouse to a ship in orbit. Investigators are currently trying to determine the identity of this vessel, which leaped into hyperspace immediately after receiving the transmissions.

The Rebel terrorists have been taken into custody, and are presently being interviewed by Prefect Glaffold's staff. They will likely be extradited to the sector capital for penal judgment once the interviews have concluded.

Imperial HoloVision

Tigellinus Inducted into Elite Order

Imperial City, Coruscant

In a formal open ceremony in the Skydome Botanical Gardens this evening, Grand Admiral Ruffaan Tigellinus donned the midnight-black velvet robe of the Order of the Canted Circle, one of the most ancient social organizations on Coruscant, and definitely the most exclusive. The Order rarely takes on more than 11 members per decade, which makes Tigellinus' induction noteworthy — he is the thirteenth member added within the last seven years.

Tigellinus' induction in particular came as quite a surprise to Court observers, since many prospective members, all of them well-regarded leaders of Imperial government, have been kept waiting for an invitation from the Order for years. Tigellinus, by contrast, has only emerged as a Court player within the last year. It is a tribute to his savvy and ability to serve the Emperor that he has been able to advance this far in so short a time.

The Order's private ceremony, held in an undisclosed location within the palace, took place later that evening. It was not open to outsiders.

Coruscant Daily NewsFeed

Saboteurs Hit Wroona Stardock

Stardock, Wroona

The Wroona Stardock was rocked this morning by a powerful explosion aboard the *Victory*-class Star Destroyer *Rampant*, berthed at the facility for repairs. The explosion came from the vessel's port-most ion drive, which was undergoing refitting after a recent campaign against Rebels in the nearby Boeus Sector.

The blast was quickly followed by a flurry of fighter activity around the stardock facility. A squadron of TIEs engaged a force of snubfighters, a Corellian Corvette and a gunship, which stormed the stardock in a vain attempt to inflict further damage. The attacking vessels escaped swiftly into hyperspace after destroying the TIE fighters.

After the raid, stardock officials received a transmission from Kabalard Vinne, a Wroonian outlaw and former representative of the Guild of Armament Distributors. Vinne said the sabotage was a response to Governor Norrin's recent crackdown on some of the less legitimate Wroonian guilds. Having been declared illegal and losing their guild halls to Imperial raids, members of the Guild of Armament Distributors, the Spice Shippers Fellowship and the Contracts Guild (bounty hunters) fled Wroona to ply their trades elsewhere. Vinne said the raid wasn't part of any overall plan. "We just wanted to throw some sand in Norrin's face for what he's done to our professions. The bottom line is, we had fun doing it. Maybe next time we'll get a bigger explosion."

TriNebulon News

From: Hamiz Spel, Intelligence: Analysis
To: Pettyr Zent, ByblosNova
Subject: Interception of Rebel Code Messages
Confirmed: SEND; TRAN 34/37; RECV
Context: 10E6; AMAN; ASYS
Phasecycle: PSEG004651138903; WORD; 00.01.12BMUT; 1.39RMUT

Pettyr,

It appears that the Rebel scum on Byblos are active again. Our agents intercepted couriers with the following messages, but the Rebel spies, fools that they were, chose to let the interrogator droids wipe their minds clean rather than tell us what the messages really meant. Fools ...

My agents are still decoding these messages: I am confident we have captured vital information on Rebel troop and supply movements disguised as instructions for an as-yet unknown technical manual.

The last known contact for the Rebel cell is appended to this file.

PAID IN FULL

Rebel 1: "I don't believe how I let myself get talked into these things! Tell me again why it is that we have left Rebel Alliance headquarters and are travelling half-way across the galaxy to a backwater world full of cutthroats and thieves."

Smuggler: "Listen carefully, dim one. Egot Pai-4-Yem is a crime lord. I owe him 25,000 credits. He'll break my knees if I don't pay up. But you can't just mail that kind of money to a crime lord; he expects you to deliver it in person. Kapich?"

Rebel 2: "Okay, okay. So we've got to deliver it personally. But why couldn't Egot have chosen a more savory spot for his headquarters? Why such a shoddy planet?"

Smuggler: "I beg your pardon. This shoddy planet you're talking about happens to be my homeworld. It's one of the few interesting spots left in the galaxy."

Rebel 3: "That's what you said about Hoth!"

Smuggler: "Alright, alright, cool it you guys. We're about to leave hyperspace."

Rebel 3: "Right on target. There she is, fellows—we've reached the Harridan system."

Rebel 1: "Hey, look at that! There's a *Victory*-class destroyer orbiting the planet. It appears that the Empire has found your homeworld interesting as well."

Smuggler: "I've got a very bad feeling about this."

Cynabar's Back! Did You Miss Us?

CORUSCANT NODE: Well, troopers, as you can see, we have returned from our vacation. Or exile, as you prefer. Spent a few lovely weeks knocking around here and there in some fairly remote areas of space. We'd rather not go into specifics (in case we decide to do this again sometime), but one tip to the very well traveled: avoid the monk ships if you're hitching a ride with slavers. Aside from that momentary unpleasantness, we had an enjoyable expedition.

And now, back to work, in a fresh new office in fresh new digs. The Imperial search and destroy mission against us has flagged a bit with the tragic accidental deaths of the three most recent head investigators (nothing that we did ourselves, mind you — but it seems we do have a few enthusiastic but anonymous fans in the bye-bye business).

Like our new address? We thought we'd ruin some poor ISB grunt's day by setting up shop a few offices down. Not that they'll ever actually find us. We're Cynabar, after all.

News? Well, we're just getting caught up, so things are a bit slim until our networks are back on line. Still a few interesting items have already crossed our desks. It seems Nada Synnt has finally shed that ridiculous name and fallen back on, well, even more ridiculous pseudonyms — Tosin Dise and Benner Dunnit are two of the less painful. He's flying a new ship, too, a nice little Corellian Desslin number called *Pareesh D'Thot*. He is doing rather well, though, since he seems to be helping the Empire misplace rawmat shipments.

Bettle and Jaxa are back to running guns to Ralhtiir, though we can't figure out why, since the crackdown there has made such runs especially risky. Rumor has it that Jaxa isn't too thrilled at the idea, especially since the *Mallixer* nearly got snagged running the blockade a few weeks back, but Bettle is in an insistent mood.

Rumor has it Platt Okeefe is lying low for a while — although we've heard she's used some of her rainy-day credits to take out a contract on a puny little amateur newsnets reporter. No doubt there'll be more word about her soon.

Laughter After Dark

Bowing his head to the blower jets, Thaddeus Ross stood in the darkened cubicle as the biting cold of the Najib rain evaporated from his closely cropped blond hair. Still damp from his brief excursion through the storm, his collar was hot from the torrid blasts of air gusting over him and he flinched slightly. As the doorway opened, admitting him into the innermost room of Reuther's Wetdock, he raised his head and proceeded inside.

In no mood for a confrontation, the Corellian swept the length of his rain duster away from his right hip, exposing the wicked profile of his Caelli-Merced heavy blaster, which was slung low in its holster. There were few patrons to take note of the smuggler or his pistol as he walked into the deserted bar. He fumbled through his pockets for a credit, squinting against a cloudy smog of stale liquor and spice smoke. As he fingered the thin coin against his palm, he briefly made eye contact with Reuther, the Najib bartender, who greeted him with a slight nod and a look of bemused concern.

Ross continued to the back of the establishment, pausing in the far right corner at the sound slug machine. The dilapidated music box had seen better years. Its bubbled, glass dome was dingy from layers of dust and caked with accumulated smoke particles. Dented and scuffed by careless drunkards or brawlers, the antiquated entertainment unit was supported by a sawed-off metal piece where one of its support struts had been broken off. Inside the thin plasteel dome, a collection of sound slugs and mini-holovids were displayed in the selector, waiting for an interested party to pro-program a request.

Ross dropped the credit piece into the corroded slot and pressed his selection. After a moment of low humming and static, the holo-projector dimly lit the area above the inverted projector tube, producing the svelte image of a Twi'lek woman. She was dressed in a scarlet gown that accentuated her hips and slender torso. Between a staggered line of brilliant glass buttons, her mahogany skin showed through in places, exposing smooth sections of her shapely body from bare shoulder to thigh.

With full, pouting lips, the seductive image beckoned to him with a subtle nod. "Used to be that darkness frightened me so; used to be I spent my life chasing the sun. "

Ross swallowed the lump in his throat and turned away from the holo-phantom. The Corellian sat down at a nearby table and closed his eyes, enduring the insistent protest of his tense muscles.

"I know all too well the fear of night... but with you, there is only laughter... laughter after dark. "

Carrying an intricately carved bottle and a glass. Reuther shuffled over to Ross' table. Dressed in a stained work tunic and apron, the bartender dragged a seat over the scuffed floor of his bar and sat down. Despite the depth of the shadows, his eyes flashed with inner brilliance, bringing a spark of optimism to the tavern's lonely back corner. Coarse, white hairs were tightly braided against his skull, joining into a single, thick braid that ran the length of his back. He cleared his throat, pushing the glass across the table toward the smuggler. "How long have we known each other. Ross? Seven, maybe eight years?"

Lethargically, as if in a trance. Ross pulled the stopper from the bottle and smelled the pungent aroma of the liquid inside. "About seven years, I guess. " he replied softly.

"A man gets to know his friends, especially a partner, over that many years. " Reuther sniffed disdainfully, wiping at the wide bridge of his nose. "I know you better than you think I do. "

"I'm not in the mood for a psychiatric evaluation, Reuther. Get on with it."

Reuther sat back in his chair, thoughtfully rubbing the stubble maturing at his chin. "What's gotten into you, boy? I could set my ordering catalogs by you. Once a year, and only once a year. I order this Twi'lek t'ssolok. " he pointed to the sculpted container, "and guaranteed within two or three days, you show up at my doorstep, looking like Death's first mate just took a shot at you. " The Najib snorted leaning over the edge of the table. "You come in here, play that same song. You drink until you can't see straight. Then you leave without a word about what's ailing you. I'm no head fixer, Ross, never claimed to be. But I'm the next best thing. " Reuther took the bottle from Ross and poured a generous portion into the waiting glass.

"I've often dreamed of a perfect world, " the song continued, in clear amber and white light. "

Ross sipped pensively from the glass, wincing at the bittersweet aftertaste. "I never told you about my little side adventures with Trep Winterrs, did I?"

"You've mentioned Trep a few times. "

"Have I ever mention Saahir? Saahir Ru'luv?" Reuther slowly turned to the music box, then back to the smuggler with a glimmer of mischief in his eyes. "The singer? You knew her?"

"About seven years ago, shortly before I met you. Trep and I found ourselves on the wrong side of an Elomin protection scam that went all wrong... "

The shot slammed through his blast vest. Ross gasped as the point-blank discharge forced the air out of his lungs. Though disoriented, he pulled the trigger of his blaster rifle, firing

into the Elomin assassin. The reptilian was thrown back several meters, blast scores smoking from its chest and abdomen. Muscles recoiling involuntarily, the Elomin returned fire randomly at its aggressor.

Several subsequent shots were absorbed by the vest; but Ross felt the bruising concussion of each one. He gritted his teeth as his body finally hit the hard, polished floors of the embassy lobby. Numb from the initial blast, he opened his eyes and stared at the light rod swinging precariously above him, wondering when the final moment, the last breath would come. "Ross?" he heard the concern in his partner's voice.

Trep Winterrs brushed the long black hair over his shoulder as he entered Ross' field of vision and stooped down to look over the fallen smuggler. His handsome features were buried beneath layers of sweat and grime. He shook his head as a wide grin spread across his face. "I can't believe you took that hit for me. "

"What was I suppose to do?" Ross had hoped for a snarl, but his retort was more of a groan. He struggled inwardly, desperately holding on to the last shattered fragments of consciousness. He rolled to one side in a frantic attempt to get up, but failed. "Stand there and watch him shoot you in the back?"

Trep took the blaster rifle from Ross and checked its power cell. "The deal's gone sour, buddy. The old ambassador is growing cold as we speak. I'm not going to let the same happen to you. Can you shoot?"

"I'll manage. " Ross squeezed his eyes shut as the pain washed over him. He forced his body to react and respond as Trep helped him to his feet.

Ducking a blast from the far corridor, Trep turned so Ross could return fire. The blast ricocheted off the polished sheen of the wall and brought down one of the intruders. "Whole thing's falling apart. " Trep complained. He pulled Ross tightly against his back and crouched over, carrying the smuggler's full weight.

Ross struggled to keep his eyes open. "Whose idea was it to put a Gamorrean in charge of a diplomatic security team?"

"Ishenn had promise. Besides, if you weren't going to do it, and I wasn't going to do it, who was? That little Chadra-Fan with the patch over his eye?"

Explosions sounded from farther inside the embassy building, scattering debris into the deserted streets of Elos, one of several capital cities littering the surface of the Elomin homework!. A siren blared in the distance, a warning that reinforcements were on the way. In a hurry to vanish before any questions could be asked, Trep scurried over to an abandoned landspeeder and gently laid Ross inside the passenger seat. "Hold on, buddy, " he said, hopping over Ross and into the driver's seat.

Trep tore loose the guidance assembly and quickly gathered the connecting wires and plugs. Ross watched from what seemed like a great distance. "The red wire first, " he slurred, slumped against the back of the seat. "Always the red wire first. "

The smuggler rewired the red filament as Ross instructed. Startled as the spark flew from the connection, he gunned the throttle, bringing the cold engine to life. Under his guidance, the landspeeder lurched forward onto the streets, swinging wide as a troop carrier swerved onto the boulevard. Trep threw the steering bar to the side and managed to control the landspeeder through the 180-degree turn. He made a hasty retreat, revving the engine as they sped into the spaceport docking pads just outside the perimeter of the embassy yards.

The landspeeder bucked as Trep hurdled the partition, which cut off the exterior flight docks from the inner holding bays. Ross could see the outline of his ship, the Kierra, resting just beyond the main port building. Despite his failing vision, he could clearly see the yellow sentry lights flashing beneath the ship, signaling that the freighter's preservation systems were functional.

"Ross?" He gently Pulled the smuggler against the seat. "Ross, stay with me. You hear?"

"I'm not going any-where. " A numbing chill settled over him; but

Ross was too exhausted to tremble against it. He shrugged indifferently and allowed himself to silently fade into the oblivion of unconsciousness

"Kierra, open the hatch!"

"It is open, " the droid replied. "Why? Are you expecting a visitor?"

Ross swallowed the dryness in his mouth and struggled to sit up. The familiar sights of his personal cabin swam around him in a blur. A searing pain shot through his body, making the sweat break out against his feverish skin. Falling back into the cot, he closed his eyes, composing himself and the muddle of his disconnected memories.

There was a slight hum of electronics as the droid intelligence trapped within Ross' ship-and who was named for the freighter- refocused the optical lens over his bed and began taking sensor readings. "Ross, " she said, panic creeping into her voice, "your heart rate and blood pressure are dangerously low. Some vital signs aren't even showing up! Trep, do something! His critical systems are failing!"

Ross managed a short, painful snort of laughter. "I'm not going anywhere, darling. Don't you worry about that. " Even though he was quite still, he felt sore and bruised throughout his being and took a deep, cautious breath to quiet his racing heart. "Kierra, if you use your hydraulic sensors to test my vital signs. I'll come out on the verge of dying every time. They're not sensitive enough. "

"I know, but I feel so helpless. " The feisty droid's manner was subdued with concern, striking a soft chord in the smuggler's heart. "Just lie still, okay? Trep's coming. "

"Well I'll be a Kowakian monkey's uncle! He's alive!" Trep swaggered into the cabin, grinning broadly.

"Where are we?"

"You know, I was really worried about you. I don't know a thing about first aid, Rosco. "

"I said, where are we, Trep?"

Trep wiped his hands on his work tunic and grinned even wider, purposely holding back the information. "You should have seen your face when that blast went through your vest. "

Grabbing Trep by the sleeve. Ross clenched his teeth against the pain and yanked the smuggler against the side of the bunk. "I'll ask you one more time! Where are we?"

Trep easily dislodged the smuggler's hand. "You're home, buddy.

Corellia Dock 52. "

"Dock 52!" The reference raced through his mind. "The private mooring dock for the Orange Lady Tavern?"

"Your memory's not bad for a man who's been technically dead for five days. "

"Dead? Five days!" The room started to spin and Ross once again teetered on the edge of unconsciousness. He closed his eyes and fell back against the bunk.

Trep called out, "Saahir! Saahir, I think he's slipping back into it. "

"Saahir?" Ross whispered the name, feeling his heartbeat quicken as his mind reeled with the emotional complications associated with it. For a moment, his body settled into a warm, secure cradle of love, happiness and a sense of belonging, but as the sensation matured, it was darkened with the burden of commitments unkept, separation, and loneliness.

Ross struggled back to lucidity, as he heard a gentle metallic clinking, which echoed in the room. The chime momentarily stopped and in a frustrated moment of rage, he panicked, falling back into the darkness. When he felt the gentle touch of her fingertips against his chin, Ross opened his eyes, staring up at the Twi'lek woman who smiled down at him from a long forgotten pedestal.

"How you feeling, hero?" Her mouth curled into an almost menacing smile as she gently plucked at a tuft of his hair.

Ross took her hand to assure himself that this was no phantom. "I don't know. Why don't you tell me?" He sat up slowly on one elbow and caressed one of her smooth cheeks.

Saahir was wearing a brown, tapered-down waistcoat, her favorite outer apparel, and a low-cut white blouse that showed at the sleeves, accentuating her slender arms. Black leggings revealed every curve of her legs and hips. In the placid illumination of the cabin lights, her head tentacles were a mysterious black hue, rather than the swarthy earth brown of her face.

Doesn't take you long to get in the mood, does it?" she teased, bring his attention back to her face. "You know, Ross, " she held up a large silver ring that encircled the middle finger of her left hand,

"my magic potions are guaranteed to be successful, but there's a price. "

"You poisoned me?" Ross cried. He remembered that the ring a small needle for injecting an unsuspecting host with t'ssolok extract, a dangerous paralyzing poison that was always fatal without the necessary antidote.

"Somebody had to slow you down. " Saahir replied, pouring an odd blue solution into a cup. "You were swiftly on your way to Otherspace, flyboy. You were on your way out for good. " She sat back and smiled, holding the cup in her hand. "I couldn't allow that to happen. At least not without saying goodbye. "

She put the cup to his lips, raising his head slightly, and allowed him to drink a mixed variant of the antidote. "You know. Ross, once you've fallen under one of my spells, you're mine, body and soul, forever. " The Twi'lek set the empty glass aside, smiling sadly. "If only that were true, huh?"

"Can you handle him alone, or should I stay?" Trep crossed his arms over his chest, leaning against the hull wall.

"Erbus has a menu waiting for you in the kitchen, " Saahir said. "I suggest you take advantage of it before he gets busy. I'm doing a show tonight, and the place is sure to be packed wall to wall. "

As Trep left them alone, Ross carefully managed to put an arm behind his head. "So you're still singing?"

"That and saving your sorry choobies. The two things I do best. " Saahir pulled the medical kit closer to the side of the bed and leaned over him, checking the damp dressing over the blaster wound. "That bandage needs changing. " She gently pulled at the tape, pausing

briefly as the smuggler flinched beneath her slight touch. "Would you look at yourself?" she teased. "Stop being a baby and hold still. "

Ross closed his eyes and tried to focus on something else, besides the chest hairs the Twi'lek was forcefully removing with the meditape. Unable to bare the slow prick of each hair as it was ripped from the skin, he winced dramatically. "You know, you could go a little slower and really get back at me for all those years. "

"Or I could just make one quick twist. " Saahir pulled the tape off one sudden motion. "And get back at you anyway. " She glared at him as he opened his eyes. With a coy smirk, she checked the wound, pleased with its progress. "I know my opinion won't matter much to you, " she carefully packed a new bandage around the injury. "but I think you should stay in bed for a few more days. " The Twi'lek pulled the blanket over his chest and shoulders and stood up, slinging the med pack over her shoulder. "I'll be back by morning. "

"Back?" Ross grabbed her by the wrist. He winced sharply as the motion caused pain to shoot through him. "Back from where?"

"Ross, lay still, " Saahir scolded, gently pushing him down. She pursed her lips, shaking her head sternly. "It's a little late for you to start acting like a husband, don't you think?"

"I didn't mean it that way, " Ross countered. "It's just, " he avoided her cold eyes, "we just got here and now you're rushing off. "

Cocking her head to one side. Saahir smiled, showing an even row of white teeth. "Well, if you must know, flyboy, I have a business venture waiting for me offworld. "

"Who's flying?"

"Me, of course. Since I don't have my own in-home flight jock, I've had to make do myself. "

"You? Since when did you start flying cargo?"

"I haven't. This'll be my first, but because of the schedule it couldn't be helped. " Her lips were drawn down in a subtle pout.

Sucked in by the expression. Ross felt a pang of guilt, complicated with a twinge of jealousy. "What's the cargo?"

"The less you know the better. "

"Oh, one of those. I get it. " He stared up at her, gently caressing her long fingers. "Look. Saahir, I owe you one and-"

"You'll fly it for me?" she asked, cautiously curving the pitch in her voice.

"I didn't say that. I said I owed you one. "

"So that means you'll fly the shipment for me, right?" Saahir began playfully rubbing the hairs on the back and sides of his neck. She watched in delight as the smuggler squirmed, blushing from the attention.

"You know I hate it when you do that. "

"Liar, " she whispered in a husky voice. "You love it, always did. "

Growling against the warmth spread through his body, Ross clenched his teeth. "How much?"

"I can guarantee you five thousand credits up front. " Saahir intensified her efforts. "There may be more, depending on your role. "

"What do you mean, depending on my role?"

"We can talk about that later. " Before he could protest, the Twi'lek frowned, examining his forehead. "Oh, look here. I missed a scratch. " She bent over and gently kissed him on the forehead. "And here's another. " She kissed him above his right eye.

"Okay, okay. I'll do it. " Holding her slender waist, he smiled as he pulled her down onto the cot. "Now give it to me straight, doc. Will

I make it?"

"Don't worry. " Saahir took off her jacket as he unbuttoned her blouse. "Under my care, flyboy, you're certain to make a full recovery"

"Saahir?"

Ross raised his head from the pillow, smelling Saahir's perfume. His back was against the hull wall, allowing enough space for another body beside him; but the Twi'lek was not there and the blankets were cold. She had been gone for some time. "Saahir?" he called again. Thinking her absence might be an overdue game of hide and seek, he held onto the top bunk support and stood up, holding his injured side.

Ross found a pair of pants and a shirt, pressed and folded over the back of his cabin chair. Stiff from the shock of his wound and the extended bedstay, the Corellian dressed himself, carefully pulling his boots over his feet and ankles. Zipping the back of the leather tops, he straightened his flattened blond locks and stared into the darkened corridor. The fragrance of her perfume was everywhere, on his skin, his clothes, even in the passage, making it

difficult to tell whether she had recently been there. However, there was a stale ambiance to the scent that suggested the singer was long gone from this area of the ship.

Stepping through the narrow bulkhead into the flight cabin, Ross quickly glanced around the cockpit for some sure sign of the Twi'lek. He found none. Beside him, curled up beneath his flight jacket and a blanket, Trep Winterrs was sound asleep at the navigator's station, oblivious to his presence. Ross grinned, leaving the exhausted smuggler to his sleep, and moved over to the main command console. "Kierra, did Saahir leave the ship?" He keyed up the display monitors, scanning miscellaneous reports on his freighter's current functional status. "Kierra, " he raised his voice. "Is Saahir still aboard with us?"

"Yes and no, " came the curt reply.

Stung by the unexpected acridity in the droid's voice, Ross leaned into the acceleration chair, glaring into one of her optical orbs. "What do you mean yes and no?"

"You asked two questions. I gave you two answers, " Kierra said smugly. "Yes, she left the ship. No, she's not on board. "

Though Kierra had a tendency to be combative and difficult, Ross knew that there was a cherished common bond between them. Puzzled by the droid's peculiar behavior, he slowly filtered through the caustic verve in her voice and picked up on the jealousy behind it. Drawn back to the events of the previous night he hung his head as a warm flush spread over his cheeks and neck. "Kierra, about last night, " he began pensively, realizing the droid had seen and overheard the entire affair. "I didn't mean for you to see- I mean-" He threw his hands up, exasperated by a need to explain himself. "I wasn't thinking clearly. I'd never intentionally hurt-" Ross cut himself short, struggling with a justification for his actions. "Kierra?"

"It's been hard, you know, " Kierra said at last, her speakers barely audible in the quiet of the cabin. "We haven't known each other very long, and I suspect it will take a lot more adjustment, for both of us. " A sigh registered over the static of the receiver. "I understand, Thadd, really I do. I haven't exactly been the best companion for you, especially over the last few months. " The sigh grew into a slight snuffle, reverberating through the channel. "And then there are my mood swings, my emotional outbursts, my hydraulic bloating, and weight gain. It all takes its toll. Thadd, in ways you couldn't begin to imagine. And of course. I can't give you that physical satis-"

"Will you stop it!" Ross snapped, seeing through the droid's dramatics. Hearing a snort and a chuckle from behind him, Ross turned on Winterrs. "And that goes for you too. Always humoring her. "

Sluggishly shifting in the acceleration chair. Trep grinned impishly. "Hey, don't take it out on me, Rosco. You're the one who put the smug in the word smuggler. " He rolled his eyes with mock indigence. "Courting two gorgeous ladies at the same time. You know the old saying,

buddy. If it's got a good set of hips or servomotors, you're going to have trouble with it. " Winterrs tossed a datapad to the vexed smuggler.

"What's this?"

"That clue you've been looking for. Saahir gave it to me before she blasted off. Coordinates, contacts, passcodes, the whole works. "

Ross briefly scanned the information as it scrolled across the screen. "The Aurea system. That's not too far away. "

"Only a half hour in hyperspace." Trep stood up and stretched, joints cracking and popping along the length of his lean body. "We set down at Merich's Bend, on the far side of Aurea's third moon. That's where we take on the cargo. "

"Well. " Ross said with a grin. He started flipping flight switches and toggles, powering up the Kierra's ion drives. "We can't keep the lady waiting. Kierra, contact Traffic Control and ask for take-off clearance. "

Ross waited until the vent of pressurized hydraulic steam dissipated before he reached under the strut cuff to reattach the hose. Ducking under the faulty valve, he burned his fingertips attempting to reseal the conduit. He swore a vehement Corellian oath and quickly donned his gloves, managing to secure the damaged unit. The support strut dropped down from the hull and locked its dock boot against the mooring floor. Smuggler's sense tingling with suspicion, he cautiously popped the restraint on his holster, propping the heavy blaster at his side. Then with feigned interest in the strut, he watched from aside as the port steward and a crew of seven men approached him from the port terminal.

"Are you Ross?" the head crewman asked. A heavily built man, he was dressed in orange and gray cargo fatigues, fitted with a work belt of tools that barely managed to support his ample stomach and bulk.

"Maybe. " Ross leaned against a structure integrity rod, cocking his hip slightly to display the lifted blaster. "Who wants to know?"

The older man grinned sardonically. "There's no need for that, Captain Ross. My name is Hante. " Glancing over his shoulder, he nodded to one of the crewmen behind him. The rangy youth advanced on the freighter. "The tower instructed us to bring on the cargo as soon as you arrived. " The necessary passcodes were sufficient to ease Ross' suspicions, but before he could alert Winterrs, one of the crewmen was moving up the ramp and into the ship. "Bad idea, " he heard Trep saying in the corridor. "I didn't hear you ask nicely. " A moment later, the crewman reappeared on the ramp with Trep's blaster pointed directly at his nose. Ross hung his head and laughed quietly.

"Keep moving, " Trep growled, pressing the muzzle against, the frightened loader's nose. At the bottom of the ramp, he paused to initialize the hatch, closing and securing the entrance to the ship. Ross activated his comlink with a smile. " 194?"

"I read you, Ross. "

"Kierra, is the inner bay corridor secure?"

"That's what you wanted. "

"Open the cargo bay doors for the gentlemen. " Hante signaled to his crew and watched on as a repulsorlift car, was backed into the freighter's opening cargo doors. As his men assembled themselves along the edges of the carrier, he turned his attention back to Ross, holding his hand out to the smuggler "I was told to give you these as soon as you arrived on the planet. "

Ross took the small, silver strips from him, glancing over the decal and inscription.

"Tickets?"

"Lady Saahir is giving a performance at Merich's Bend Standing room only, I understand. " Hante paused to acknowledge a wave from one of his men. "If you hurry, you might be able to catch the last few minutes of the show. "

"I might just do that. " Ross felt Trep's shadow fall in across his shoulders and started toward the hangar doors

A late afternoon storm had left the city of Ifeoma shrouded in night mists and showers. Outside in the deserted streets, the music from Merich's Bend Tavern caused a slight vibration in the multitude of puddles left behind in the wake of the storm. Ross grinned, anxious to be reunited with Saahir.

"At least one of us has something to smile about, " Trep complained Hands thrust deeply in his jacket pockets, he glanced about the streets as if expecting trouble. "What's eating you?"

"Something stinks about this deal, Ross. Did you see the way those guys lined up at the cargo ramp" Military style cargo outfits use that formation, highly trained military cargo units. I don't like

"So they're using a military technique. A lot of spaceports have gone in for that sort of efficiency thing. "

"You don't understand. I can smell a Rebel from half a kilometer away, and I tell you. Ross, this place stinks. I think Saahir's up to one of her tricks. "

Ross shrugged off his partner's concerns, ignoring his own nagging suspicion. He stepped through the double doors of the tavern and was engulfed in a resonating pulse of music and background noise. From the density of bodies and smoke in the front room, he realized that Hante was not exaggerating about the crowd and found himself shouldering his way through the packed audience.

Shifting around a flock of enthralled Ithorians. Ross threw a quick glance toward the center stage. He smiled as Saahir's costume glittered in the bombardment of the spotlights. As her voice died away in time to the music, she turned to a sharply dressed human man with close-cropped hair standing at the side of the stage and blew him a kiss. Ross paused, fighting a sudden rush of jealousy. Ignoring Trep's playful tug at his sleeve, he stood still, watching as the man walked onto the stage and handed Saahir a large bouquet of some sort of exotic flowers. While the act did not at first seem out of order, Saahir's reaction sent chills down Ross' spine.

As Ross watched in horror, the beaming Twi'lek wrapped her slender arms around the stranger and kissed him. It was not a playful, teasing kiss that she had used to woo him during one such performance, long ago. It was not the kiss of friendship, new or cherished. It was a passionate display, the way she used to kiss him, the way she used to hold him during their three-year affair. It was the way she had held and kissed him last night, suggesting intimacy with this stranger.

A peculiar lump rose in his throat. His hand flew to his blaster as he moved through the crowd.

"No, you don't, " Trep grunted, grabbing Ross by the sleeve and hauling him back. "Beat it, " he gestured at three Jawas who were sitting in a center aisle booth. The diminutive creatures scurried into the crowd. "You look like you could use a drink. " Trep sat Ross down in a chair and waved for the waitress.

"I'm not thirsty. " Ross allowed the raw emotion to wash over him, instilling life to his rage. He glared at Saahir, willing the Twi'lek toward him. In a moment, she did, but the glance was fleeting. Recognizing him in the front room, she turned back to the Human at her side and tapped him on the shoulder, pointing in the direction where Ross and Trep were sitting. He nodded to a nearby companion and then followed her off the stage.

"You made it!" Saahir gushed. With her arms intertwined around the human's waist, she hesitated at the edge of the table, flinching slightly under Ross' fierce glare. Throwing her head back in defiance, the Twi'lek flared her nostrils, as if daring the smuggler to question her relationship with the human at her side. "Juri, this is Captain Thaddeus Ross and his partner, Trep Winterrs. " Glaring at Ross she leaned close to the pair and whispered, barely audible over the noises of the crowd, "Boys, this is Juri Marbra, my fiancée. "

Trep groaned, cautiously putting his hand over Ross' blaster to prevent the unthinkable.

Saahir sat down as Marbra pulled the chair out for her. "Stop looking at me like that!" she hissed, keeping her voice in low tones so as not to attract undue attention.

"How should I look at you?" Ross growled. "After three years together, I never, " he slammed his fist against the table top, "never had you figured for a Rebel sympathizer!"

"Don't even try and deny it, pretty boy, " Trep said evenly. "You've got it written all over your face. "

"You didn't tell him?" Marbra whispered in Saahir's ear.

"I decided not to, " Saahir replied, not being so discreet. "As you can see, it would have complicated things. "

"I can't believe you'd involve me in this, knowing how I feel about lost causes. "

"And what do you consider a lost cause, Captain Ross?" Marbra asked, his voice sharp with the experience of giving commands.

Ross glared at Saahir, responding to the question without any need for words. He was rewarded by a glimmer of tears that swelled in her eyes.

"Sooner or later, we all get involved, " Marbra commented. "There's no such thing as a disinterested bystander these days. "

"Aren't there?"

"Most of them are dead. " Marbra looked uncomfortable as he glanced from Ross to Saahir, then back to Ross. Then the practiced, neutral expression of a military man returned to his face. "Shall we check on our cargo?"

As the first tears rolled down her cheeks, Saahir rose. "I have to change, " she whispered, deftly wiping at her eyes. Kissing Marbra once on the forehead, she turned back to stare at Ross and then quickly withdrew to the safety of the shadows. Leaving Trep to guard his back, Ross stormed out of the bar, leading them with long, angry strides. The lump in his throat was explaining, giving way to emotions that he would rather have avoided. Ross locked his hand against the cool heel of his blaster, ready for a confrontation as he passed through the spaceport doors and into the main bay area. Angry at Saahir's betrayal and at being an unwitting pawn for the Rebel Alliance, he was prepared to take on anyone who challenged him.

Feigning disinterest, a trio of armed security guards kept vigil a few docks away from the Kierra. As separate groups-the cargo crew, the guards, the custom wardens-the Rebels might fool even the most suspicious Imperial official; but seen as a whole, they could not fool him. Ross realized that they all sported the same slick, military cut and precision-team

manners, insuring his smuggler's sense that they were all part of the elaborate scheme. The fact that they knew more than he did only served to further infuriate him.

In an attempt to rattle their cool disposition, he walked directly to the back of his freighter and moved into the cargo bay, where several stacks of crates had been loaded. Staring into the scandoc on a few of the boxes, he did not recognize the coding and blinked in horror as the scandoc suddenly shifted, mutating and degrading before his eyes. "Can you make this out?"

"Don't need to read the doc to know what's in the box. Rosco, " Trep snorted. Kneeling beside the crate, he pointed to the affixed Imperial seal. "This is the mark of an Imperial Munitions sector chief. "

"Guns? Ammo?"

"Guns, ammo, and then some according to the docket. " Trep grinned, leaning against the box. "All the stuff that makes war fun. "

"Wish 1 could share your view, " Marbra said evenly, eyeing Trep. Then targeting Ross under his critical gaze, he nodded to his men, dismissing them from the area. "You know, " his voice echoed in the spacious compartment, "you were quite hard on Saahir. It wasn't necessary. "

Ross straightened abruptly, balling his hands into fists. Trep stood between him and the Rebel, prepared to keep some semblance of peace. "And just where do you think she spent last night? While you were collecting your cargo-"

"She was with you. " Marbra smiled with unexpected pleasure, amused by the Corellian's surprise. "Saahir is a woman, a beautify woman of worldly means, Captain Ross. But you see, I love her, and because I love her, I don't expect her to change overnight. It took her years to learn how to survive this deviant lifestyle, and it will take years for her to outgrow and forget it. And I'm prepared to wait and aid her in any way possible. Besides, you needed her and she needed you for our cargo. She only did what she had to in order to assure your cooperation. But if you still want cash payment, " Marbra pulled a credit voucher from his breast pocket, "I can accommodate you. "

"You're a dead man!" Ross screamed, fighting to break away from Trep's grasp.

"Ross!" Trep bellowed. "I don't know what you were expecting, buddy. Same old Saahir, turning tricks for the upper-class masses. Get a grip-" Managing to keep the Corellian in check. Trep inspected the voucher. "It's 10, 000 creds. " He showed it to Ross, hoping the sight of riches would entice the smuggler to behave.

Ross ignored the money, wrestling with a frantic urge to draw his blaster and fire on the Rebel leader. "What's the deal?"

"Our backs are to the wall, Captain Ross, " Marbra began. "The people we've secured these weapons for are in trouble. We'll need a seasoned pilot and skilled guns to reach them. Saahir assures me we can rely on your skills alone. " He grinned at Trep. "But a renegade from the Imperial Army will be more than welcomed, even helpful. "

Trep straightened his flight jacket, cocking an eyebrow at Marbra. "With the extra money, that's 2, 500 a piece for the muscle. "

"What if I said it wasn't enough?"

"What?" Trep gasped. "Ross, you get three times-"

Marbra pulled one more chit from his pocket. "Would an additional 5, 000 credits secure your services?"

Ross nodded to Trep to receive the chit. Then turning his back on Marbra, he stepped through the corridor bulkhead. "Come on, let's get this over with. "

Staring at the accumulation of dirt and dead skin beneath his fingernails, Ross used the edge of his knife to clean out the debris, He leaned against the cushioned back of the control chair, blowing away bits of grime as they surfaced. Folding the knife back into position, he tucked it inside his pocket and sighed, rubbing the tension from his forehead. Above him, somewhere along the perimeter of the hidden Rebel base, an explosion sounded. A shadow moved into the doorway, and the smuggler sat up, staring in that direction. "What took you so long?"

"I had to slip by the sentries. " Trep's face was dark with disappointment. "All they had was this t'ssolok. " He pulled the carved bottle from his coat, shaking the viscous blue liquid inside the container until it thinned against the sides of the glass. "The cook says the good stuff is locked away in the officers' quarters. Wouldn't that figure?" He sat down across from Ross, straddling another control chair. "A poor man can't get a decent swig of the good stuff nowadays. Doesn't matter whose army it is. " He sniffed disdainfully at the bitter smelling t'ssolok. "Are we really going to drink this?"

Ross snatched the bottle from him. "Have you got something better to do?"

"Yeah, but it's at least 50 light years from this place. " A distant explosion sent a shock wave through the deserted station room. "And a whole lot quieter. " He watched as Ross took a swallow from the bottle, then boldly took one himself. "Hey, this isn't bad. " His eyes abruptly began to water and twitch in response to the caustic flavor that burned his lips and tongue. Trep gasped as the liquor inflamed his throat, sending spicy fumes through his nostrils.

"It's not the flavor you have to worry about, " Ross said with a grin, taking the bottle from Trep's trembling hands. "It's the aftertaste that kicks. "

Another explosion rocked the control room, shifting the ceiling supports. The lights flickered. "Whew, " Trep said hoarsely, massaging his throat. "That was a close one. "

"Doesn't sound like Saahir's Rebel friends are doing too well. " Ross threw his head back for another swallow, closing his eyes as the rich flavor assailed his senses.

"They're not. " Saahir stood in the doorway, the graceful curves of her slender body were a dark silhouette against the brighter lights in the corridor.

"Maybe they need a little morale booster, " Ross said. "Why don't you get on the comm and hum a few patriotic bars for them. That'll get their blood going. " He laughed softly and glanced at Trep to share his cold humor, but the smuggler was having nothing to do with it.

"What about our little shipment of munitions?" Trep asked soberly. "Surely that evened the odds a little. "

"What use are 500 rifles with only 100 men to utilize them?"

"It's been done. Where's Marbra?"

"Out there. With his men, " she whispered, tears in her voice. "I'm on my way to join him now. I stopped by hoping you might come with me."

"You can count me out, " Ross sneered. "I'm not going anywhere anyone. " He propped his legs up on the console, bracing his head and neck against his hands. "I've done more than my share already"

"That's what I figured you would say. " Saahir moved farther into the room, crossing her hands behind her back as she stood over Ross, gazing down at him. "There's an old Twi'lek saying: It's easier to forgive an enemy than it is to forgive a friend who betrays you. I hurt you, Ross. I know that and I think that I shall regret it for the rest of my life. " She turned away from him, a sheen of tears on her cheeks. At the doorway, the Twi'lek paused, looking back at him. "I only hope that one day, you'll look back at all the good things that happened between us and you'll find it in your heart to forgive me. "

Trep took a deep breath, staring at her as she lingered in the doorway. "Ross?"

"Shut up, Winterrs. I'm not buying it. " Ross took another swallow of the t'ssolok, angry over the weakness Saahir always managed to trigger in him. He felt the sharp sting of the liquor washing away any remorse he might feel for denying her.

"Clear skies, Ross, " Saahir said softly and stepped into the corridor.

Trep watched the Twi'lek slip beyond his view. "Ross?"

"I said, shut up, Trep!"

A violent explosion and secondary concussions struck abruptly with enough force to knock both men out of their seats. Rolling under the console, they watched in horror as the ceiling barricades folded under the blast, allowing the interior walls to crack and fall in from the aftershocks. Dust particles and evaporated debris engulfed by the heat of the explosion, belched through the doorway and into the control room. Unlike previous explosions, this one was accompanied by blaster fire in the corridor, reverberating in the hallway.

That familiar, strangling lump again came to Ross' throat. "Saahir!" bellowed. Digging himself clear of the debris, he staggered over the wreckage of the room, hearing Trep scrambling behind him. At the doorway, voices created a shallow well of echoes and interfer-interpersed with the static of comlink discharges that were shouting orders. A trio of Rebel troopers ran past the doorway, firing haphazardly down the obscured corridor, into billowing clouds of white dust. One of them was hit by return fire and crumpled to the ruined garrison floor. The distinctive shapes of stormtrooper armor began to become visible in the haze.

Ross drew his blaster and jumped into the hallway, firing randomly at the stormtroopers converging on their position. "Saahir!" he screamed, standing over her mangled body. "Trep!"

"I'm with you, partner!" Wrapping the sling of the Imperial blast rifle around his forearm, Trep fired into the gallery of stormtroopers. His first several shots made a permanent impression on the Imperial soldiers' advancement team. Eyeing Saahir on the floor beside Ross, he nodded to the weary freedom fighters, who had paused to regroup behind them. "Get her out of here, Ross. We're right behind you!"

Taking Saahir's light weight into his arms. Ross choked at the severity of the injuries caused by shrapnel from the blast. He cradled her against him and sprinted into the corridor beyond the control room, hearing Trep shout orders to the two surviving Rebels.

"You and you, want to live? Come with me and do exactly as I do!"

Blaster fire rang out behind him, marked by wild catcalls from his partner, Ross continued his desperate run to the end of the corridor. The explosion had ripped the pressurized doors from the inner channel, leaving a darkened portal into the cold night air. As he wrestled his way through the mangled metal doors, he heard the click of blasters at his back and turned, blinded by a battery of brilliant lights.

"Hold your fire! It's Lady Saahir and her smuggler friend!"

Shielding his eyes from the glare, Ross yielded to the tug at his sleeve as a gray-haired squadron leader led him hurriedly away from the door. "My partner's on his way with two of your men, " Ross said.

The two Rebels appeared at the doorway, slipping through the wreckage. One of them was on his stomach, laying suppressive fire down the corridor as Trep followed on their heels. "That's it, boys-From left to right, then change the pattern. They won't know what hit them!"

The sergeant activated a dim light source inside the abandoned med-shelter and swiftly cleared a table for Ross to comfortably position the injured Twi'lek. "Our reinforcements are folding, son. There isn't much time. You can stay here with her; but we're going to need every pair of hands we can find in order to hold them off until the evacuation teams arrive. "

"If I don't stay, she'll die!" Ross screamed. Staring into Saahir's bloody face, he tightened his grip on her hands, as if holding her fragile life in his fingertips. "Where's the medic?"

"Dead. "

"Dead? Is there anybody-"

"The only chance of medical help died when he died. " The sergeant's features softened. "I can't promise you anything, son. But there might be a medical frigate in orbit on the far side of the planet. " He pointed to the night skies overhead. A squadron of X-wings streaked by, firing on targets at the opposite end of the shattered base. "That's where those fighters just came from. The Imperials have a stranglehold on us and we're evacuating the entire base, but reinforcements can't get through to us for another hour, maybe two. If you have a ship- "

"Trep!" Ross yelled.

"I'm on it!" He vanished into the darkness outside the shelter.

"Where's he-"

"He's going for my ship, " Ross said. "It's hidden in a cavern not far from here. "

The sergeant nodded, waving the soldiers out of the tent. "We'll hold them off as long as we can, son. You stay with her now. I'll see if one of my men can locate that frigate. " The Rebel left him, alone in the dark with Saahir.

"Ross?"

It was barely a whisper, but he heard it. Holding the Twi'lek's trembling fingers, tightly, Ross leaned over her. "I'm here. I'm here, " was all he could bring himself to say.

"It's so cold. "

Ross took off his jacket and quickly covered her. He scanned the shelter for a blanket, and snatched one from a nearby table. The bloody fabric swirled through the air, and the stiffened corpse of Commander Marbra was uncovered. Aghast, the smuggler threw the blanket back over the body, shielding it from the Saahir's view, and then hurried back to her side. "Better?" he asked, tucking the collar under her chin. He used a damp towel to wipe the debris and scorched skin from around her eyes.

"I can't see anything. "

"Flashburns, that's all. You'll be fine in a day or so. " He bit his lip to suppress the rush of emotion.

"It scares me. " She flinched abruptly as the blaster fire beyond them intensified, marked by the dying screams of someone caught in the exchange. "It's so dark. "

"It's okay, " Ross whispered. "I'm still here. " He gently held her, keeping his face close beside her so that she could feel him.

"Ross, how do you do it?"

Ross frowned, puzzled by her inquiry. "Do what?"

"You're never afraid, never scared. " Saahir trembled suddenly, reaching out for him. "How do you do it?"

Exasperated for lack of an answer, he smiled down at her, caressing her cheeks and forehead. "I just don't think about it. Which is exactly what you should be doing. Not thinking about. Trep's going to be here any minute, and we're going to get you to that medical frigate. "

Saahir tightened her grip on his hands, sensing the warmth of him slipping away from her fingertips. "I'm so scared, so scared. " She swallowed convulsively. "I deserve this. After what I've done to you, I deserve this. "

"No, no one deserves-"

"But I hurt you, " she sobbed, rubbing his hand against her cheek. "I hurt you; and that's the last thing I'd ever want to do. Ross. You've got to believe me. "

"I believe you. " He squeezed both her hands, feeling the Twi'lek groping for the sensation of touch.

"I've always loved you, Ross. Always. You weren't like any of the others. I really loved you: but I could never bring myself to believe that you could love me the same way - until I saw how it hurt you when I introduced Juri as my fiancée. " Lips trembling, Saahir turned her face toward him, tears falling to the sides of her swollen face. "I was so sorry, so sorry. " Her eyes went suddenly blank, expressionless, and still. A disturbing quietude settled over her body.

"Saahir!" Ross cried with mounting panic. "Saahir, please!"

The Twi'lek gasped softly and suddenly, her chest rising and falling in shallow rhythm. "Do you remember Isamu, that little moon in the Birjis system?" Her voice was barely audible. "You didn't believe me when I told you the trees made love there every night. But then you saw it for yourself, didn't you? You saw it. "

Ross bowed his head against the cradle of her neck, fighting back the sting of tears. Nodding softly against her, he whispered. "I saw it. "

"I didn't tell you it was simply a trick of shadows. On Isamu, the trees grow in pairs and at night time, they look like lovers kissing under the moonlight. " Moving with the slow, easy grace she was known for Saahir pulled her hand from Ross and twisted the ring from her finger. She slid the cold band onto his little finger and smiled.

"What are you-" Ross ignored the warm swell of tears at his eyes. "Saahir, no. "

"I want you to go back there. Ross, back to Isamu in that grove we discovered. I want you to go back there, and I want you to forgive for all the hurtful things I've done. " Her eyes were glassy jewels in the dimness and as each moment passed, the brilliance faded from them.

"But I do forgive you!"

"I want you to go there with someone special to you. "

"There is no one else. Saahir. No one!"

Saahir convulsed suddenly in a fit of wracking pain. She began to sing. "Used to be that darkness frightened me so. Used to be I spent my life chasing the sun. I know too well the fear of the night. With you, there was only laughter, laughter after dark. " She laughed softly.

Ross grinned, believing that she was rallying against her injuries. "What are you laughing at?"

There's no truth to that song, Ross. There is no laughter after dark... only silence. "

In the stagnant, stale atmosphere of Reuther's Wetdock, Ross leaned against the sloped back of his chair, shielding his emotions in the comfort of the shadows. Shoving away the empty t'ssolok bottle, he stared into the peculiar crystal, feeling as clear and hollow as the sculpted glass. To still the trembling in his lips and chin, the smuggler wiped anxiously at the corners of his mouth, sighing as the reality of seven haunted years sank deeply into his disquieted spirit. "She died, " he croaked. "Right there in my arms. And there wasn't a thing I could do. "

Reuther swallowed the last of his t'ssolok, wishing the biting aftertaste of the fermented liquor could dislodge the lump growing in the back of his throat. "That's a hard vector to reckon with, Ross, Never knew you were carrying that kind of cargo with you. A burden like that would kill a normal man. " He nodded, swallowing a moment of his own pain. "I know how you feel. When the Empire started colonizing this sector, my people took it upon themselves to fight back. To show the invading Igaluus that we were not a race to be trifled with. " He pursed his lips thoughtfully, crossing his legs under the table. "I lost my wife, my three daughters, and my spirit to the retribution that followed our insolence. " Reuther stared into the Corellian's eyes, strumming his fingers lightly against the table. "You need to go back to that moon. Ross. "

Ross flinched slightly. "How do you know I haven't been there all ready?"

"Because you haven't forgiven her. Or yourself. If you had, you wouldn't be here. You'd be up there under the moonlight. Until you go, you'll never fully recover. "

Staring at his hands, Ross took a deep breath. "Did you ever recover?" he asked, thinking about Reuther's family.

"Why do you think I own a bar? As long as I have customers. " he nodded to a trio of Rodians who walked through the doors. "I don't have to worry about my problems. " The Najib saluted the smuggler before he excused himself from the table.

Ross rubbed thoughtfully at the growth of beard at his chin, listening to the harsh rasp beneath his fingertips. He stood up and tossed a few credits onto the table and started walking toward the door. At the entrance, he paused briefly to glance at Reuther, smiling despite himself as the bartender winked at him from across the way. Pulling his collar snugly against his neck, he stepped out into the deserted streets and pressed the comlink against his cheek. "194. "

"Reading you, Ross. What's up?"

"Set a course for the Birjis system. For Isamu. " He moved through the spaceport to the exterior lot behind the main bay, walking with a smooth fluidity induced by the effect of the t'ssolok.

"What are we going to do when we get there?" Kierra asked.

Ross paused to glance over his shoulder into the sky. The rains had stopped, leaving a light glaze of freshness and newness over the spaceport grounds and buildings. Beyond the dense mantle of storm clouds, he could see the dawn breaking, fighting its way through the upper levels of darkness to dispel the night's shadows.

"Ross, " Kierra whined, "what are we going to do on Isamu?"

Ross walked up the ramp, cueing the keypad and hatch to close. "We're going to lay a few souls to rest. "

A chilling autumn wind blew in from the high country, disturbing thin layer of cooling mist from the surface of the mountain lake. Ross felt the gentle fingers of the breeze moving through his blond spikes and smiled as his body shivered in the grip of cold. After a seven-year hibernation from living, full living, it was comforting to experience the sensations of the world again.

Surrounded by the intertwined shadows of Mu trees, he grinned as the shadows about him and a mixture of the blue light being cast by Isamu's primary made it appear as if a dozen or more lovers had gathered with him on the shores of the lake to celebrate that most cherished of all emotions. Folding his arm behind his head. Ross stared into the black expanse of the atmosphere, indulging himself by counting all the stars in one sector of the night sky. "Ross, why didn't you ever tell me about this place?" Sensing an annoyed tenor in the droid intelligence's voice, Ross begrudgingly sat up on his elbows. "Don't worry, Kierra, we're not staying long. "

"Oh no, no, no. I don't mind it. It's sort of romantic. Makes me feel like, like... "

Ross glanced over his shoulder to where the YT-1300 stood on an extended outcrop of rock. "Like what. Kierra?"

"Like, " an embarrassed giggle translated over the comlink, "like singing. "

Ross smiled, sinking back into the late season growth of grass. "Knock yourself out, darling. " After a few moments, a soft humming could be heard. He recognized the first few bars of Saahir's song, "Laughter After Dark. " He pulled a leather cord from around his neck and broke the knot as he took the metallic ring from the end. It was warm from being so close to his skin.

Cupping the band in his hand, he again folded his hands behind his head and sighed as a quiet peace stole over him. Nearby, the light cast by the rising planet spotlighted a lone Mu tree. Disease or natural disaster had withered away its twin and it stood alone on the edge of the lake shore, surrounded by joined couples. No worse for its loss, the tree was the only

one in the immediate area to boast several branches full of late autumn blossoms. Ross dosed his eyes, listening to the melody of Kierra's voice and that of the wind. He envisioned the Mu tree behind his lids, still growing, without a partner, still surviving, and fell soundly into a well-deserved, peaceful sleep.

Credit Denied

Rendra stepped through the massive archway where at one time equally massive doors had kept out unwanted visitors. The interior of the temple was shrouded in musty darkness, and she had to pause a moment to allow both her eyes and her lungs to adjust to the new environment.

Shapes slowly coalesced in the black void before her—stairs leading downward... rows of seats running in concentric circles around the chamber... a domed ceiling of opaque plasteel tiles stretching overhead. And in the very center of it all, at the lowest level of the temple, a triangular dais covered by the decaying remains of a once-great altar.

A cold gust of wind swirled the dust at her feet, and she pulled her waist-length flight jacket more tightly about her to ward off the chill. "Can't meet in a nice, warm space station, no," she said, her words echoing around the chamber as if caught in a whirlwind.

She headed down the worn stairs toward the dais, scanning the seats for signs of her contact. It seemed he was late—not necessarily a good way to begin a business relationship as far as she was concerned. She chuckled to herself as she realized her father's wisdom was still lurking in her mind no matter how hard she tried to rid herself of it. She had no intention of winding up like he did, and if he had lived his life by the same tenets he had taught her, she wanted no part of them.

But still, showing up late could cost you a deal—she couldn't really refute the logic of that axiom. So it seemed she was following that adage, at least until she could figure out some way to disprove it. For now, though, she'd have to let it ride.

As she reached the bottom of the stairs, she glanced up and around. Standing on the low ground made her somewhat anxious, but the archways that led outside were still clear, and she'd seen no indication of trouble thus far.

She ripped the blaster from the holster at her hip so quickly and with such ferocity that she almost tore the straps holding the holster against her leg. She let her eyes pass along the top row of seats, and then slid the pistol back into its resting place.

Yeah, still the fastest draw in the galaxy, she thought as she turned her attention to the dais. Three stairs led up each side of the triangular platform, but they were covered with so

much debris that they seemed impassable at the moment. All that remained of the altar was a ragged hulk of rotting wood-even with the moonlight spilling in from a shaft directly overhead, she couldn't make out any of the symbols running across the sides. Whatever god this temple had once venerated had been long-forgotten or his people long-conquered, the thought of which gave Rendra the creeps, as if she were standing in the middle of an ancient crypt swelling with angry souls looking for some mortal to take the blame for whatever evil had befallen them.

Why do I do this to myself? she wondered as she eased back from the dais. The first row of seats halted her progress, and she whipped around, just in case someone or something had managed to sneak up on her.

But she found only decomposing wood and fabric-not much of a threat as far as she could tell.

"Maex, " called a voice. Her name spiraled around the chamber as if possessed of its own life.

She snatched her blaster from her holster and pointed it in various directions as she sought out the voice's owner.

"There's no need for that, " said the voice. This time she was able to catch its point of origin-a group of three, maybe four, figures moving through the same archway she'd entered a few moments before.

"You've got interesting taste in meeting places, " she said, lowering her blaster. "If I knew you better, I'd suggest looking into psychological testing. "

"I'm sure you could do with a bit of that yourself. " the being said dryly, apparently far from amused. He reached the bottom of the stairs and stopped about five meters away from her. In the minimal moonlight seeping into the temple she could see that he and his companions were definitely humanoid-but for all the detail she could make out they could be humans, Bith, Nikto, Duro, or anyone of a thousand other humanoid species.

Whatever he was, he was staring at her, apparently waiting for something. She gave a shrug to indicate her confusion, and he responded with a gesture toward her blaster.

She could see that his comrades had blaster rifles or carbines slung over their shoulders, but at this point they seemed to be fairly at ease. She didn't feel there was any harm in holstering her own weapon for the moment-besides, she could outdraw a long firearm any day. "

"I suggest we get straight to the business at hand, " the leader said finally as he slipped a hand into an interior coat pocket and extracted a datapad. With a flick of his wrist he sent it spinning through the air toward Rendra.

The slap of her palm against the plasteel stuttered through the temple, dying to nothingness as she read over the text. Slowly, a reverent silence filled the chamber as if whatever spirits remained here had been awakened by the commotion and were now anxiously watching and waiting.

Rendra found herself reading the document over and over again. The words simply didn't seem to make sense in her mind. But she soon realized that they accurately and precisely conveyed the intention of their author.

She looked up. "Are you serious?"

"Quite, " he said without any particular inflection. "And for that sort of money, I would think you would not take the matter so lightly. "

She glanced back to the datapad. and nodded. "Yeah, that's a lot of credits... but I don't know-

"It is far too late for a change of heart, my dear mercenary. You will carry out the duties described there or you will... let us just say that your life will become even less pleasant. "

She shifted the datapad into her left hand, leaving her right free to grab her blaster when the moment came, "I don't remember agreeing to any of this. "

"Come, Rendra. We both know you need those credits desperately. Do not pretend that such a sum would not save you from years of difficulty. You are required to accomplish a relatively simple and straightforward task. My sources say that you can handle this in your sleep. "

"It's not a matter of what I can and can't do-it's a matter of whether I want to. "

The being laughed. "I admire your... scruples. But you speak as if you have a choice, when you do not. "

In a blur, she whipped her blaster out and had it trained on a spot she believed was. the middle of his forehead before the sibilance from his last statement had faded away. "This gives me a choice. "

"First of all, I don't care how good you might think you are with that thing, but you can't kill all three of us before you die. And second, you miss the point: I've already alerted GalactiCore to your presence here. If you can't pay them, they will impound your ship and you will be completely without resources. "

She maintained her stance as she considered his words. He was right: without her ship she'd have no livelihood whatsoever, making her far worse off than she was now. She

looked to the amount listed on the datapad. The price was more than fair, and it was a onetime deal....

"All right, " she said quickly, before she could change her mind. At the same time she lowered her blaster. "When do I get my money?"

He reached into his coat again and threw her a credit stick. "That's half. You get the rest when you complete the assignment. "

"That's not enough to pay off GalactiCore. "

"I know. "

You sneaky little-She took several long strides toward him before his companions raised their blaster rifles, stopping her in her tracks. She heard nothing, but she could see that he had started laughing by the flickering of moonlight across a crescent-shaped amulet hanging from his neck.

Before she let her frustration get the best of her, she shoved her blaster back into its holster and charged up the stairs and out into the cool night air. As she pulled her comlink from her belt she looked up to the starlit sky. "Okay, Nopul, " she said into the link. "Let's get out of here. "

She put the comlink away and watched a tiny speck of light descend from the sky.

* * *

"Sounds like a bad idea to me, " Nopul Etrafa said, his husky, Kerestian voice accenting his pronunciation. The breathing holes set beneath his eyes expanded as he breathed out-what in human physiology would definitely be considered a sigh.

Rendra glanced off into the cantina's eclectic crowd-a collection of aliens from across the sector and beyond: some off-duty security officers drinking themselves silly a few booths away, an intense game of dejarik festering off in the corner. Standard patronage for a space station bar in the Periphery.

She finally looked back to Nopul, who was staring at her, apparently still expecting her to comment on his remark. "We owe GalactiCore more credits than some planets earn in a year. And if we don't pay them, we'll be stranded-and I don't want to go through that ordeal again. I don't think I could handle it. "

Nopul said nothing, just continued to fiddle with the holo-locket he kept on a chain around his neck. She wasn't sure exactly what he might be thinking, but she knew she didn't like it.

"What, you think I want to do this?" she said. "I would think you'd know me better than that. "

He looked into her eyes, his face set in an accusatory expression, but still he remained silent.

"Look, if you've got a better solution, let's hear it. "

He breathed deeply and shook his head. "No, no. Your synopsis of our situation is accurate, and I don't have an alternative. I just wanted to make sure this job didn't at least bother you a little. "

Rendra stared at her companion for a few heartbeats, and then couldn't help but smile. "You know, you're a better friend than I deserve. " She grabbed her drink from the table. "Just don't let it go to your head, " she said and then swallowed the remainder of the Corellian whiskey in a single swig.

"So, when are these mercenaries supposed to show up?" he asked, scanning the latest group of arrivals.

"Not sure. Dania said we should just-"

"Whoa-you let Starcrosser put this deal together?"

"Yeah. Why?"

Nopul looked at her as if an arm had suddenly grown out of her face. "Gelgelar? Fiery conflagration? Loss of all cargo? Any of this sound familiar?"

Rendra felt her defense mechanism kicking in. "That wasn't Dania's fault-"

He shook his head, and his eyes squinted in that annoying Kerestian expression of shocked disbelief. "You'd better cut down on that whiskey: it's starting to affect your memory. "

"Okay, okay, we've had our problems with Dania in the past, but right now we don't have time to establish a new contact in this sector or travel out into the Rim to hook up with Keleni. If we don't take care of this job immediately, we're out of luck and out of credits. And then we're out of a ship. "

Nopul's expression slowly shifted from incredulity to understanding and then finally to reluctant acceptance. "Fine, point taken. But I'm still not happy about it-about any of it, for

that matter. " His eyes shifted to survey the crowd again. "I can't wait to get this over with. "

"You and me both, " she said as she gestured to the waitress at the bar for another whiskey. "Just keep an eye out for anyone wearing a red sash or scarf or something. That's the sign. "

"Well, so far I don't-

The sound of shattering glass interrupted his statement, and their attention was immediately drawn to the dejarik table in the back corner. Two aliens were standing on either side of the game board shouting at each other in languages that the other didn't seem to understand.

"You catch any of that?" Rendra asked.

Nopul continued to listen for another second. "Apparently the one on the left, the Nikto, thought they were playing the Beshin Variant, and the one on the right, the Dresselian, thought they were playing the Smuggler's Option. " He paused to absorb more of the argument. "And it sounds like they both take the game pretty seriously. "

As they continued to watch, the Nikto suddenly yanked a hand-sized spherical object from a compartment in his belt. At the same time, the Dresselian brought a hold-out blaster to bear on the Nikto.

"Great, " Rendra said, doing her usual best to infuse sarcasm into the word. "This is exactly what we need. "

"I say we make a quick exit. "

She turned to Nopul. "Uh, did I mention we're supposed to meet the mercenaries here-in this bar?"

"Yeah, but in a few minutes there might not be a bar to meet in. "

Rendra glanced back to the confrontation. The Nikto had set the thermal detonator's timer, and the Dresselian still had the blaster pointed at the Nikto's forehead.

"Wait here, " Rendra said as she got up from the table.

"I'll think I'd rather wait over there, by the door, if you don't mind. "

Rendra would have laughed at Nopul's comment if she weren't about to walk into the middle of a conflict between two apparently humorless aliens holding deadly weapons.

By the time she reached the dejarik table, she still hadn't come up with a specific plan-but then again, that had never stopped her before. "So, is there a problem with the food?"

The two aliens glanced at her without turning their heads. "Go away, " the Nikto said in mispronounced Basic.

"Look... friends... we can work this out. There's no reason to blow yourselves and everyone else here into the next system. Why don't we just sit down and talk about-"

The Nikto looked straight at her and clicked the detonator's timer into the "on" position. From her angle she could see the chrono display: less than thirty seconds and counting.

The Dresselian started screaming at her in an uninterrupted barrage of gutturals and sibilants, none of which sounded even remotely familiar. Apparently, a calm discussion was out of the question, leaving her with a single choice.

Before the aliens could even comprehend her movements, she had drawn her blaster, shot the detonator out of the Nikto's hand and the hold-out blaster out of the Dresselian's, caught the detonator as it sailed through the air, and was just now clicking off the timer.

Both aliens twitched as if to come after her, but a wave of her blaster halted them. "Oh, what, you don't want to play now that you've lost your toys?"

The Nikto seemed more ashamed than angry, while the Dresselian completely ignored the remark.

"Well, I'll assume you two have learned your lesson. Now play nice. I don't want to hear from you for the rest of the... "

Something had caught her eye. She looked from the Dresselian to the Nikto and then back again....

Both were wearing red straps around their necks. She'd been too preoccupied with their weapons to notice before.

"You're not Vakir'sa'jaina and Oro Memis?" she asked. "Please say you're not. "

They looked to one another, then back to her, and nodded.

Rendra dropped her head. "Okay, Dania, that was your last chance, and you blew it. " she muttered.

She regarded her mercenaries. "All right, you two. We're already late. Let's get moving. "

* * *

"So, what you're saying is that you've finally lost it, " Nopul said as they passed through the wide archway leading away from the station's commercial district and into the docking bay complex.

Rendra glanced at the Dresselian and the Nikto to make sure they hadn't heard Nopul's remark. The two were in the midst of some sort of heated discussion, oblivious to anything going on around them. Satisfied, she turned back to her companion. "What am I supposed to do? We don't have time to find someone else, and even if we did, how do we know they wouldn't be worse?"

Nopul looked back to the mercenaries, and then regarded Rendra. "I don't think that's possible. "

She wasn't sure whether he was just giving her a hard time or was genuinely concerned. Either way, she had no choice. GalactiCore wanted its money-it didn't care if she was having staff difficulties. She decided to steer the conversation in a different direction. "Did you slice out those Ships and Services codes?"

If Nopul noticed her tactic, he didn't show it. "You doubt my abilities? Well, perhaps I should link up with someone who-"

"Did you?"

"Of course I did. Stars, you're testy. I'm just trying to lighten the mood. "

Rendra started a rebuke, and then realized that she was the one who was in ill humor. Sometimes Nopul displayed more wisdom than she thought he possessed. Being constantly on edge wasn't going to help her complete this mission, especially given her current stack of problems. Another of her father's axiom's began to play in her mind, but she silenced it as soon as she realized its source. Thanks, Dad, but I'll handle this on my own.

"Uh, " she began, trying to recall where the conversation had left off. "So, what's our status?"

They turned down a narrower corridor toward the outer edge of the complex, farthest from the rest of the station. Starving for credits definitely had its disadvantages.

"Well, I swapped our BoSS registry numbers with a trading vessel called the Runaround. The Zoda still has the same transponder code-I just changed the information in BoSS's computer

banks to reflect the new ship information. It's a lot harder to detect a forged file than a forged transponder. "

"The Runaround. Sounds appropriate. " She looked at Nopul, and they both broke into laughter, finally relieving several hours' worth of pent-up tension.

As they took the next corner into an even narrower hallway, Rendra suddenly came to a halt. Nopul stopped a couple of steps ahead, and the aliens just managed to avoid slamming into both of them.

The Nikto muttered something behind her. Rendra had picked up enough of his language to know he was wondering what was going on. She turned and put a finger to her lips to silence him and the Dresselian, and then motioned for the three of them to stay put while she checked things out.

Halfway down the corridor she stopped at the hatch to bay 919- A, where she had docked her ship. She checked the control panel on the wall and found there had been one access since she'd left.

She turned to issue Nopul and the aliens instructions when the bay door suddenly slid upward, revealing the wicked muzzle of a blaster carbine pointed at her chest.

"Maex. What a coincidence. I was just looking for you. " The Nimbanel spoke in his native tongue, but she understood every word-she'd had more than enough experience with Hutts and their Nimbanese underlings than she cared to recall.

She tried to hide the fact that she had been in the midst of signing to someone outside of the Nimbanel's view, but in doing so she had sacrificed her chance to quick-draw her blaster.

"Please, come in, " the Nimbanel said with his mouth and insisted with his weapon. "You know, GalactiCore isn't very happy with you at the moment. You seem to have missed... " he glanced at the datapad in his other hand "three payments."

As soon as she stepped inside, the bay door slid shut behind her, locking with a hollow thud.

"Uh, " she said, cycling through every con and outright lie she could think of. Unfortunately, nothing useful came immediately to her mind, leaving her with the weak, honest approach. "Look. I don't have the money right now. But I just took on a job that will make me enough to pay back all of those payments, plus two more. "

A hollow whine sounded from somewhere behind her ship, and she glanced over the Nimbanel's shoulder to see an espionage droid hover into view, its ocular scanners whirring as they took in every square inch of the vessel. That task now complete, it turned toward

Rendra and its owner to capture data on their verbal transaction. She'd had to use such precautions on several of her own jobs before, sometimes for legal reasons, sometimes because her benefactor wanted to watch his target squirm. "Oh yes, " the Nimbanel said, stealing her attention away from the droid. "My informants placed you on Eryso in the Hedya system thirty-two hours ago. Let's see, you met with several beings from a ship called Chasa Riv, BoSS registry 52462474-245. You left twenty-three standard minutes later carrying a datapad you didn't have when you arrived, and then, according to vector calculations based on your ship's maximum hyperdrive speed, you immediately jumped here. "

She had to admit: the Nimbanel was thorough. But as he was wasting time reading off the log of her recent activities, a plan had begun to take shape in her mind. She just needed a few more pieces of information to make sure it would have at least a chance of working.

"You've been keeping track of me. " she said, maneuvering slowly into a conversation. "I'm surprised you didn't pick me up twenty minutes ago while security was doing that background check. " She did her best to hide that fact the her statement was an outright fabrication.

He regarded her with a forced smile. "Yes, well. It doesn't seem to matter now, does it?"

Perfect, she decided. He must not have any informants here on the station or he would have known she was lying-which means he doesn't know about my newly acquired mercenaries.

"So, " he continued as he pocketed the datapad, "I'll take the scandocs and the pass-keys to your ship. Now. " He punctuated the request with an almost imperceptible heft of his blaster carbine.

Her eyes tracked down to her own blaster-"Do I have to take the keys from your dead body? That's not in my contract-although I don't really have anything against it, other than having to fill out those tedious security reports. "

"Look, uh... " she said, fishing for his name. When he didn't offer, she continued. "Let's work out a deal. You and me. I'm going to earn a lot more than I need right now. I'll cut you in if you'll just give me three days to-"

She saw him flick a switch on the carbine-she didn't know exactly what it did, but it couldn't be good-and she knew she'd run out of time.

She turned and leaped for the door controls as a blaster bolt zinged over her head, blowing a fist-sized chunk of duracrete out of the wall. From her prone position she reached up and clicked the release mechanism.

And nothing happened.

Another blaster bolt exploded from his carbine, this time striking the floor and spewing a cascade of debris across her back. She rolled several turns to her right as the Nimbanel continued to take shots at her.

Finally, she pushed herself to her feet and snapped the blaster from her holster. Before he could fire another shot, she had loosed a pair of laser bolts straight for his chest.

The first slammed into an invisible barrier that showed itself by flaring a pattern of visible-light static, as if the molecules in the air in front of him had momentarily erupted into a chaotic frenzy and then returned to normal. The second bolt met the same fate, leaving the Nimbanel completely unharmed. Rendra had always wanted her own personal shield, but she'd found the prices exorbitant. Apparently this bounty hunter was good at what he did if he could afford such a device.

Her mind raced as the Nimbanel smiled and took aim at her once more, moving slowly as if to signal his confidence of his inevitable success. Why hadn't Nopul and the others charged in once they'd heard the exchange of blaster fire? She glanced to the door... and then down to the control pad. Oh yeah, she realized, it's coded. Let's see what we can do about that...

She raised her weapon to fire again, but rather than targeting her opponent, she tracked across the room to the door release.

The Nimbanel smiled at her obvious mistake, and took an extra moment to aim at her head.

Rendra fired, but the alien paid the shot no attention as he sighted her through the targeting guides. He squeezed the trigger-And then a barrage of blaster fire lanced across the bay from the open doorway and knocked him halfway across the room toward her ship, where he crashed to the floor and lay motionless.

Rendra looked back to the bay entrance as Nopul and the mercenaries walked in with weapons still readied for any further trouble.

"So, " Nopul said, looking innocent. "You need any help in here?"

She smirked. "Exactly what was your plan? Wait 'til I come up with one and then get involved?"

"Well, if I knew that was going to be your attitude... "

Rendra noticed that Vakir had walked up to the Nimbanel's body and was searching through his belongings. After grabbing a few small items, he put the muzzle of his blaster pistol against the Nimbanel's temple.

"Hey!" Rendra shouted, startling everyone including herself. "What're you doing?" She marched over to the Nikto and pulled his blaster away from the Nimbanel's head. "If he's still alive, let him be. He had a job to do-I don't take it personally. Besides, we'll be long gone by the time he wakes up. "

Vakir looked down at the Nimbanel, shrugged, and then walked away.

A thought suddenly crossed Rendra's mind, and she scanned the bay for the espionage droid. "Anyone see a little annoying droid flying around?"

Her companions searched the bay, but came up empty.

"Well, " she said, heading for the ship, "I guess it doesn't matter much now. All right, everyone, let's go. We've got a lot of work to do and not much time to do it in. "

* * *

Rendra wandered back into the Zona's-now the Runaround's-roughly circular recreation area to find the Nikto, the Dresselian, and Nopul engaged in a multiround sabacc hand, judging by the number of credits in the pot.

"Who's winning?" she asked as she plopped herself down onto a nearby couch.

"Oro, " Nopul said without letting his eyes stray from his card-chips. "For now. "

The Dresselian laughed-a staccato shushing sound that made Rendra wonder for a moment whether the alien was actually having trouble breathing. But when Vakir threw him a hard look and Oro suddenly shut up, she knew she didn't have to worry.

She watched as Vakir pulled a card-chip out of his hand and then looked to his two opponents, apparently searching for some hint of their reaction. Whether he had learned anything or not Rendra had no way of knowing, but he slipped the card back into his hand, selected another, and promptly shoved the new choice into the interference field in front of him.

For a moment, no one said a word, Oro and Nopul staring at Vakir as he regarded his pile of credits while clicking his sharp nails against the table.

"You bet or no bet?" Oro demanded.

Vakir slowly raised his gaze toward his fellow alien-and then suddenly reached across the table and grabbed the Dresselian by the throat.

"Okay, okay, " Oro managed to gag out, "take as much time as need. "

Satisfied, Vakir released his death grip. He watched his credits as he mulled something over in his mind, and then apparently came to a conclusion as he tossed the rest of his credits into the pot.

"Twenty, " he said, although the word could have been just a grunt as far as Rendra was concerned.

The other two matched the bet, and then turned over the card-chips in the interference field in front of each of them.

"Looks like Oro wins again, " Nopul said, pushing himself back from the table. "Deal me out. "

As Oro gleefully pulled the pile of credits toward himself, Vakir slumped back in his chair with a definitively dejected look on his face. Oro continued to make various happy sounds until he noticed the Nikto sitting silently next to him.

Oro looked at the credits, at Vakir, and back to the credits. With his hand he cut the pile in half and pushed the credits that fell on one side over to Vakir, whose eyes lit up as the winnings came his way.

Nopul watched in utter confusion. "What in the stars are you doing?"

Oro looked at him as if it were obvious. "Vakir no credits, Oro no play. No fun for either of us. "

Nopul shook his head as if to clear his mind of the bizarre logic, while Rendra chuckled at the entire series of events.

"I get the impression you two have worked together before, " she said.

"Many times. " Oro said as he stuffed his half of the credits into a compartment in his belt. "And always. "

Vakir simply nodded as he collected the remainder of the pot and started stacking the credits in hand-high columns.

"Good, " she said, "because we can't afford not to trust each other. What we're about to do is dangerous. Any one of us slips up and we all go down. "

She pushed herself up from the couch and walked over to the wall of storage compartments. "And we only have one chance at this. If we fail the first time, we're out of luck. "

"You haven't mentioned what we are to accomplish, " Vakir said.

"Yes... I know. Well, " she started and then cleared her throat. As she leaned her back against the bulkhead, she risked a glance in Nopul's direction and saw exactly what she expected: a look that begged her to reconsider one last time. She responded with an expression of her own: we don't have a choice. When she thought she had given Nopul enough time to catch the gist, she turned back to the mercenaries. "We're going to assassinate Uli Aaregil, the clan-leader of the Weequay. "

She let the statement hang in the air for a moment to allow for reactions, but Oro and Vakir only looked at her expectantly.

"So, " she continued, "we've got about nine hours until we reach the Sriluur system. Why don't the two of you get some sleep while Nopul and I take care of some of the final preparations. "

The two aliens nodded, got up from the table, and headed back into the sleeping compartment without so much as a word. Rendra found their silence somehow discomforting.

"So, " she said after they had left. "They took that pretty well. "

"Yeah, I guess they did, " Nopul said as he brushed down the two strips of hair running across his scalp. "Too well. I would say. "

"We don't need people who are going to question what we ask of them. "

He cast her a strange glance. "We don't?"

Rendra found herself shaking her head. "Do we have to go over this again? I thought we'd straightened everything out. "

"Yes, you did spell out the entire reasoning in explicit and extremely logical terms. "

He was giving her that look again, the one that made her want to reach out and strangle him. She knew she had to take her eyes off him to stop herself from acting on her instinct, so she opened one of the storage units in the wall and pulled out a case filled with electronic devices.

"You can't even face me, " Nopul said. "Doesn't that tell you something?"

She spun on him before she could even think. "Yeah, it tells me I should start looking for a new partner. "

"Oh, I see, you call this a partnership. I was under the impression that partners had equal say-

"All right, fine. This isn't a partnership-it never was. I'm the one who always has to do the planning, who has to figure out how we're going to make it to the next job without getting killed, running out of credits, or losing the ship. "

"And I sit around and do nothing, just follow you on these 'jobs' as you call them, sucking up your hard-earned money. I'm just another worthless alien feeding off the underbelly of humanity. " Contempt flashed across his face. "Maybe you should take a closer look at yourself before you decide the value of someone else. "

She threw the case of electronics onto the table, scattering the card-chips onto the floor. "I don't need you to be my moral compass. Maybe I am devoid of ethics. I don't know. But you're no better than me, and your righteous attitude is starting to get on my nerves. "

"Fine then, excuse me for trying to stop you from making a mistake that could haunt you for the rest of your life. And you're right, I'm not any better than you. You want to kill Aaregil for money sign me up. I'll take my share and start up my own little legitimate business. "

Nopul's last inflection almost sent Rendra completely into a rage, but she managed to control herself long enough to say, "Just get these jammers working. " And with that she headed aft to her personal quarters, her emotions seething just below the surface-much closer than she liked.

One of her father's sayings about something or other started to coalesce in her mind, but she quashed it before it could fully form. Whatever it was wasn't going to make her feel any better-that was one thing she never doubted about her father's remarks.

Once alone inside her quarters with the door closed, she walked straight over to one of the valla-wood crates containing her personal gear, and punched it as hard as she could. The old wood splintered at the point of impact, revealing the ancient clothing stored inside. As her mind filled up with memories sparked by the sight of the old clothes, she began to sense something, as if she were being-A buzzing whine from behind her brought her full around, blaster extended toward the source of the sound.

Hovering before her-and looking completely innocent-was the Nimbanel's espionage droid. its ocular scanners whirring as they recorded.

Rendra holstered her blaster. "So, this is where you decided to hide out, " she said. "I guess we think alike. "

* * *

"This place is busy, " Nopul said as he surveyed the crowds overflowing the city streets. Looking down from their open-air docking platform, they could see a majority of the metroplex. Hundreds of thousands of beings congested the avenues and cross-streets, blocking up the surface-bound traffic for kilometers in every direction. Even the skyways were filled with planetary vehicles of every shape and function, from tiny swoop bikes to the most elaborate repulsorcraft.

"It is expected for such an event, " Vakir offered.

Everyone turned toward him with expressions of mild surprise.

"What?" he said in response. "You did not listen to the public channel's METOSP?"

Oro and Nopul continued to look confused, so Rendra added what little she could to the unfolding information. "That's 'Message To Spacers, ' the frequency that informs incoming traffic about space lane vectors, local regulations and laws, and recent events that could affect interplanetary travel. "

"And?" Nopul prompted Vakir, pointedly ignoring Rendra.

"And, " the Nikto said, "Today marks the... " He stopped to think for a second, and then continued in the slow, dry speech pattern of a comm announcer. "The historic peace agreement between the Weequay and the Houk, who have long been arrayed against each other, especially here on Sriluur. "

"That's a pretty good impression, " Nopul commented, "Can you do an Imperial stormtrooper?"

Rendra silenced Nopul with a look. "Well, this isn't going to make things any easier. Security's going to be tight. These sensor jammers had better work. "

"They work, " Nopul said simply and-at least from Rendra's perspective-forcefully.

"Good, then let's not waste any more time, " she said, and then headed for the turbolifts that would take them to ground level.

An hour later-twenty minutes later than Rendra had anticipated-the quartet arrived at the Coliseum of Witness deep within the city. The edifice rose high into the bluish sky in a

vaguely mushroom-like shape, a combination of angles and curves woven together so gracefully that the building seemed more like an artist's masterpiece than a bureaucratic afterthought. Apparently the Weequay were a more creative race than her previous experiences had indicated.

"This it?" Oro said from behind her.

She kept her gaze on the structure, still marveling at its beauty. "Yep. Power up your sensor jammers. We've got a job to do. " She lingered for another moment, then flicked a switch hidden on the inside of her belt and marched toward the Coliseum's gaping archway, which was already thick with pedestrians seeking entrance.

As they queued up at the end of the line, Rendra scanned the crowd. Though a majority were Weequay and Houk, several other species from the sector were represented. She even noticed a few Bith and a handful of Rodians mixed in with the rest. This event has to be pretty important to attract so many beings. And I can't imagine that that can be a good thing.

She felt the emptiness in her stomach, and wished she'd consumed something before they'd left the ship. She didn't need any distractions.

Slowly, the line moved forward as security checked out each and every being who wanted to get into the Coliseum. As far as Rendra could see, they were using some kind of droid to scan each being for... well, for whatever they didn't want passing into the arena.

She turned halfway toward Nopul, who was standing just behind her, but didn't look directly at him. Pretending instead to be casually checking out the length of the line. "You ever seen that kind of droid before?" she said, barely moving her lips.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw him maneuver his gaze toward the security station ahead. "I don't recognize it. Could be a local R-series variant. "

"Will the jammers work on it?"

"No way of knowing. "

Now she focused on him, a look of fear mixed with annoyance on her face. He only shrugged in response. She pivoted forward again as the line moved ahead. Well, this will be fun, she thought as she watched the droid's sensory receptors scan a Houk from head to foot.

Though she hated to admit it, she could sense the fear growing within her. It was an emotion she hadn't allowed herself to feel in a long time—since the last time she thought she'd had something to lose. Better to be worried than to have nothing to be worried

about, she decided, hoping her intellectual side might convince her emotional side to calm down. Unfortunately, the argument didn't carry the weight she thought it might.

After she'd had enough time to acquire several more symptoms of anxiety-rampant perspiration among the worst of them-she reached the head of the line. The security guards-one Weequay and one Houk-motioned for her to step up. As she moved into position, the droid's miniature sensor array followed the contours of her body. Halfway down it came to an abrupt stop.

Rendra looked to the Weequay guard, who had bent over to examine some sort of display screen on the exterior of the droid's cylindrical body. A puzzled expression crossed his face, and he called over his Houk counterpart. As the two conversed, Rendra started to run through escape plans. But after a moment she realized she didn't have much chance of evading an entire security force that was already watching for signs of trouble.

Finally, the Weequay approached her. She tried to put on the best look of innocence she could muster, but she had no way of knowing whether it would translate into Weequay.

He stopped directly in front of her, one hand on the heavy blaster pistol at his waist, then waved her forward and turned to call the next person.

For less than a fraction of a second, she wondered what had just happened. Then her logical half caught up with her, and forced her to move past the checkpoint. She could count her blessings later.

A few meters down the corridor, she came to a casual halt and turned to watch the security droid scan Nopul. As soon as the sensor passed over his chest, the droid started to beep frantically. Both guards ripped their blasters free and pointed them at Nopul.

The Houk moved forward cautiously and then pulled open Nopul's double-breasted tunic. From her angle, it was hard for Rendra to see exactly what was happening, but it looked like the guard was examining something on Nopul's chest.

After a moment, the Houk lifted his hand to show the Weequay the holocharm from Nopul's necklace. He turned it on, and the image of a beautiful blue-and-brown world appeared a few centimeters above the device and began to rotate.

The other guard nodded, and the Weequay motioned for Nopul to move forward.

As he reached Rendra, she could see an odd look etched into his face. "Yeah, " he said, his voice a bit wobbly. The jammers definitely work, but they appear to have a limited range. " He patted his belt where the sensor jammer was tucked away.

Rendra couldn't help but smile at her companion as the color returned to his skin.

A minute later, Oro and Vakir had joined them and they were all heading toward the other end of the tall corridor. As they got closer to the exit archway, the rumble of voices and bodies shuffling from inside the arena grew continually louder until Rendra thought the strength of the vibration might tear the structure's supports asunder.

Finally they emerged into the vast stadium-and they all stopped simultaneously as the enormity of the Coliseum fell upon their senses. A ring of five tiers enclosed the immense area of open space-Rendra gauged that it would take a repulsor bike at least ten seconds at maximum velocity to reach the opposite end of the arena. From the topmost tier hung flat screens about a dozen meters on a side, one in each quadrant-the silver sheen of their surfaces suggested they were some sort of ancient vidscreen system, but she'd never seen one outside of museums so she couldn't be certain. As her gaze fell to ground level, she saw that the arena proper was empty except for a circular dais filled with a few dozen unoccupied chairs.

Rendra had to draw herself out of her wonderment to remember why they had come in the first place. From the information her employer had provided, the dignitaries would march in through an archway on the ground level and then parade up to the dais, where each would get his, her, or its turn at the podium. She imagined the whole procession, trying to give herself a sense of the timing and the positioning of the ambassadors and their security forces. When she thought she had the best estimate she was going to get, she nudged Nopul.

"We'll put Vakir on the east side of the first tier and Oro on the north side of the second. You'll be west on the third. That should give us a full range of angles in case he's taken any precautions. " She had to shout into his ear to be heard over the crowd.

Nopul regarded her with confusion. "What do you mean 'in case?'"

"Our employer has supposedly taken care of that aspect of the operation-but I don't want to take any chances. "

Nopul nodded. "Where will you be?"

"Ground level. I want to be as close as possible. " So I can face my actions directly, she left unsaid, though she had the feeling he understood by the grim expression on his face.

After a moment; he motioned for Vakir and Oro to follow him. They headed for the stairwell that would take them up to the higher tiers, Oro throwing her a hand gesture that she took to mean "good luck. "

In front of her a narrow set of stone steps lead down to the ground level. After taking a deep breath-the last deliberate inhalation she'd probably have for a while-she headed for her position.

* * *

Loud warbles from some large form of wind instrument sounded throughout the arena, silencing the crowd for the beginning of the public ceremony. Rendra glanced up to the tiers above and tried to pick out her companions, but the enormous size of the stadium coupled with the massive crowd prevented her from locating them.

But now that the noise had died down, she realized she could probably use her comlink. She slipped it out of her belt and flipped it to send mode. "Nopul, you in position?"

"Yes, " came the barely audible reply.

"Good. Vakir?"

No answer.

She called him again.

Still nothing.

"Oro?"

He, too, failed to respond.

She would have to assume they had both reached their positions but had either forgotten to turn on their comlinks or hadn't bothered because of the noise level. They knew the plan-she just had to rely on their ability to carry it out.

Carry it out. That was good. She didn't even want to call it what it was: an assassination. Simple. To the point.

Then why was it so hard to admit?

She shook the line of reasoning before it could go any further. I guess Nopul is getting to me. Come on, Rendra, concentrate.

She turned her attention to the two lines of dignitaries emerging from the archway. One line was composed entirely of Weequay, the other of Houk. The leader of each held aloft the banner designating his government. Oddly, the fabric remained draped about the poles, lifeless. Rendra would have expected the arena structure to create strong wind currents,

especially at ground level, but the banners remained motionless as the parade continued forward toward the dais. Come on, let's go. Let's go. Walk faster.

She pressed her back up against the wall of the small, partly enclosed alcove she'd found, then slid her hand in between herself and the duracrete and eventually up the back of her shirt. Slowly, she pulled away the hold-out blaster she had affixed to the skin of the small of her back. The weak adhesive gave way easily, and she just as cautiously slipped her hand back out, concealing the weapon as best she could as she eased it into the front pocket of her flight jacket.

The crowd remained transfixed by the ceremony before them. Rendra saw expressions of sadness, joy, remorse, and hope on the faces of the assembled beings. Though they believed they were about to witness a momentous occasion, only Rendra and her companions knew it would instead become one of the most infamous events of galactic history.

She found herself playing with the blaster trigger, and immediately yanked her hand out of her pocket. All she needed was to accidentally fire a shot-the Weequay leader hadn't even come into view yet.

Her heart was beating loudly in her head again-or still... she wasn't sure. She knew she had to calm herself down, but nothing she considered seemed possible of doing so.

Suddenly she heard a voice. It boomed from one side of the arena to the other, but didn't reverberate back upon itself. The Weequay were definitely master architects to have created dampened acoustics in such an enormous structure.

"Today marks a milestone in the history of the Periphery, " the voice continued. Rendra now saw that it belonged to a politician standing at the podium. The remainder of the dignitaries had seated themselves in the chairs covering the rest of the dais. Apparently she'd lost a good few minutes dealing with her nerves.

"For thousands of years, the Weequay, " he gestured toward one side of the dais and then to the other, "and the Houk have stood fervently against one another. Now they come together, united in peace, to put an end to their long-held differences. " He paused to scan the bewitched audience.

"Millions have died as a result of this feud. That loss comes to an end here and now. No longer will children suffer the deaths of parents, or parents the deaths of their children. Today we make peace. "

The intonation of his last statement indicated he had come to the end of his introduction, and the crowd responded with a splatter of applause that quickly turned into a raucous roar of cheers, clapping, and foot-stomping.

He put his hands up to call for quiet. "Now I would like to bring up the architect of this peace. A politician who has dedicated his entire life to ending the war between our two species... Ambassador Uli Aaregil. "

An outpouring of emotion greeted Aaregil as he rose from his seat and assumed a position at the podium.

While the crowd rejoiced, Rendra removed the blaster from her pocket and extended the tiny macroscope she had installed to aid her aim. She brought the weapon up to her eye as if she were trying to get a better look at Aaregil through an ocular magnifier, keeping the blaster concealed within her cupped hands. It would be an awkward pose to fire from, but she had no choice if she wanted to pull it off as surreptitiously as possible.

Finally, the congregation had grown quiet enough for Aaregil to speak. According to her employer's information, his speech would include the line "for all of us, from now until eternity. " Rendra had decided that that would be the signal for all of them to fire. Between the silencing units and the macrosopes, they should each be able to squeeze off a shot and retreat into the crowds before anyone could pinpoint them as the assassins.

She watched Aaregil through the scope as he fiddled with a datapad. "I had prepared a speech for this occasion, but... but, to me, that's too political for this joyous achievement. " He slipped the datapad into his tunic pocket. "Instead, I'd like to talk to you from the heart, about how I feel at this moment-one I have waited a hundred and twenty-two years to see. "

Blazing stars, Rendra cursed. She put the blaster back into her pocket and took out her comlink, pressing it against her lips. "Nopul. "

A pause, then, "Yeah. "

"No speech. Alternative: fire when he introduces the next politician."

"Right."

"Vakir. Oro. "

No response-not that she had expected one. She could only hope they'd figure out the problem on their own and contact her or Nopul.

As she exchanged her comlink for her blaster, she hoped Dania Starcrosser was having a good time wherever she was in the galaxy on the credits Rendra has paid her, because it was the last good time she was ever going to have.

Aaregil spoke. "We are about to embark on a new path for both of our species, one filled with freedom-freedom from the horrors of conflict; freedom from senseless death; freedom from meaningless ideals. "

She adjusted the macroscope until the readings indicated she had a perfect shot at Aaregil's chest. Meaningless ideals... I should have had you speak to my father years ago. If her father knew what she was about to do, he would have shot her himself. Good old Dad, always placing ideals before everything else-including his family. Rendra had committed her life to avoiding that mistake and....

Look where it had gotten her.

She stared at Aaregil through the sights. What was she doing? Saving herself from returning to the life she had struggled so hard to escape, that's what. She pushed away her misgivings. Ideals get you killed. Your father learned that the hard way. Don't follow in his footsteps. She breathed out, hoping to send her inner conflict along with it, when her comlink beeped. She yanked it out of her pocket without bothering to hide the blaster. "Yeah. "

"I got through to Oro and Vakir. They know the new plan. " He paused. "You sure killing him is worth a ship?" Just what she needed right now, another outsider questioning her life. "No, " she said crisply, "but it is worth my life. "

"And that of millions of Weequay and Houk, as well, apparently. "

It was a damning statement....

And yet. it was true. She could not deny the logic, no matter how much she wanted to.

Aaregil continued his remarks. "But I was not alone in this struggle to bring about peace.... "

"Time's running out, " came Nopul's filtered voice.

She couldn't believe she'd come this far only to question herself now. She should just do it and get it over with. Then she'd have no decision to make.

But by then it would be too late.

"He is not only my colleague, " Aaregil said from the podium. "He is also my friend. "

Rendra raised her blaster again and targeted Aaregil. She could now see that another Weequay had risen from his seat and was standing behind the ambassador. Sunlight suddenly flashed on an object hanging from the being's clothing, blinding her for a moment. When she looked again, he had shifted just enough to stop the reflection.

She adjusted the zoom on her blaster's macroscope, favoring the spot that had glinted a second before.

From a long chain around his neck hung a crescent-shaped amulet made from a lustrous metal, its hue falling somewhere in the bluish green range.

Her mind flashed on an image of the meeting with her employer in the temple-the Temple of Quay, Weequay god of the moon. The realization came instantly: it had all been a set-up. For what reason, she had no idea-not that it mattered right now. She could take time to figure that out later.

"Here he is, " Aaregil's voice boomed over the loudspeakers, "Minister Pon Svale. "

She put the comlink to her mouth. "Don't shoot!"

Ambassador Svale clasped Aaregil's arm in peace.

Rendra keyed her comlink again, recycling the entire system in case it had gone on the blink. "Repeat. Terminate mission. Confirm?"

On the dais, Svale situated himself at the podium as Aaregil moved off the side.

"Confirm?" she whispered as loud as she could in the sea of onlookers.

A pair of blaster bolts, each from a different direction, pierced the hushed silence in rapid succession, striking Ambassador Aaregil full on. Rendra cursed as she shoved her blaster inside her tunic-and then fell completely silent as she saw the result of the attacks.

Rather than knocking the ambassador down, the bolts collided with a shimmering energy shield, ricocheting the blasts upward into the sky and leaving Aaregil dazed but otherwise unharmed.

At that moment, the solemnity of the ceremony erupted into frenzied chaos. Security guards hefted their weapons and took off through the crowd. Minister Pon Svale shouted orders over the speaker system-the words all but lost in the cacophony of confused and outraged citizenry.

Rendra leaped forward, knocking down several bewildered Weequay as she vaulted down the steps into the central walkway. She flicked on her comlink and screamed into it at the top of her lungs, "Everyone back to the Zoda!! Now!"

She pocketed the comlink, and then pushed herself through the thickening mobs, heading, however slowly, toward the exit. She felt like an amoeba stuck in a pool of heavy plasma, and for once she could relate to the life of a single-celled organism.

She had no way of discovering the fates of her companions at the moment, so she instead concentrated on her own escape, hoping they would all meet at the Zoda and get off the planet before it was too late-if it wasn't already.

As she squeezed through the crowd, a lone thought dominated her mind: Minister Pon Svale would pay for setting her up. And the gods help him if any of her companions were hurt....

* * *

Rendra sat in the cockpit of the Zoda, cycling up the ship's systems so she could take off as soon as Nopul and the others arrived-if they arrived. She didn't have much of a window left, but she wasn't going to leave them behind.

A hollow pounding came at the airlock. She grabbed her blaster, which she has placed in front of her on the nav computer, and headed for the airlock.

"It's me... -on" said a voice over the comm system among the fuzz of static. "Hurry, I'm... -lowed. "

Rendra punched the release mechanism, and the airlock hissed open. Nopul jumped before it had come to its full aperture. "Close it!" were the first words out of his mouth.

"What about the others?"

Nopul looked at her, his gaze penetrating further than she liked, and then he shrugged.

She slammed her fist against the airlock controls, and the servomotors issued their hydraulic hush as the hatch closed. Rendra headed back to the cockpit.

Her hands were dancing across the console before she even hit the seat. After she made several adjustments, she fit the comm headgear over her ears.

"Well, you got us into a real mess, but I have to admit, " Nopul said as he took the co-pilot's seat. "You made the right decision. "

She continued readying for takeoff for a moment before she turned toward him. "Don't be too proud. I never had the chance to make the decision either way. "

"What?"

"I didn't fire-but not because I had a moral wake-up call. The whole thing was a setup. I didn't fire because I realized we were being used. "

Nopul said nothing and his expression failed to betray his thoughts. Rendra didn't have time to deal with his thoughts on the subject anyway, so she turned back to her initiation routines.

"You're not going to leave them here, are you?" he said finally.

"What do you want me to do? Walk up to security and say, These are my mercenaries. Please let them go. They were only acting on my orders. ' That'll get us all thrown into the detention center. "

Nopul stared at her as if examining her for the first time. She felt his gaze upon her like charged Tibanna gas, eating through to her soul. She'd never seen him give such an accusatory look-to anyone.

And the first was directed at her, of all people. How dare he....

Something in his expression stopped her line of silent defiance. It wasn't accusation etched into his face. It was surprise. Complete shock.

The same look her father had given her when she'd announce she was leaving their home, and more importantly, him. She'd realized only later that her words had devastated him, left him speechless. What she had taken for silent acceptance was actually complete shock.

Her hands slid from the console into her lap. When she was leaving the Coliseum she wanted nothing more than to rescue her companions and to make Svale pay for his betrayal. But once she had reached the Zoda, the more logical part of her mind had taken over. Only now did she realize that she was acting exactly as Svale had. betraying those who had trusted in her.

She slowly turned to Nopul, who was now staring through the forward viewport. She had a lot to say, her thoughts jumbling together so that she couldn't utter a syllable. She felt her emotions swimming in her chest, threatening to explode upward through her throat and into her head. Only through her strength of will was she able to keep them down. Without looking, she keyed the computer, shutting the engines down.

Nopul glanced over at her, a hint of hope showing through the pain and anger.

She locked gazes with him. "We're not leaving here without Vakir and Oro. "

Nopul's face broke into a full smile, from forehead to chin. If Rendra hadn't seen it, she wouldn't have believed it was possible. "How?" was all he could say.

"I haven't gotten that far yet. "

At that moment, a short whirl preceded the espionage droid's appearance at the entrance to the cockpit.

"But I'm starting to get an idea.... "

* * *

Oro gently touched the bars of their cell, eliciting a spatter of electrical discharges from the durasteel that burned his fingers. "Aah!"

Vakir shook his head. "What are you doing, nerf-head?"

"Try to get free. What you do to help?"

"Well, I'm not wasting time checking to see if the bars are still charged every five minutes. "

"Could turn off. "

Vakir snorted. "If it makes you feel better, you can continue to think that. But it's just about as likely as Maex showing up to rescue us. "

A clatter from down the corridor drew their attention. But the source of the noise was beyond their range of sight. After a moment they heard the soft patter of footsteps coming toward them.

And suddenly Rendra stepped into view, startling them both.

She put a gloved finger to her lips, and then pulled a lockpicking tool from her pocket. As she inserted the thin wand into the cell door's narrow lock, another figure floated past her.

Vakir recognized it as the espionage droid that had stowed away aboard the Zoda-except that now it was outfitted with brushes of all shapes and sizes. The droid floated to the end of the cell bay, finally resting quietly in a darkened corner. "What the-"

Rendra silenced him and then went back to work. To Vakir the whole process seemed to be taking an inordinate amount of time, but then again, he decided, it could just be his frayed nerves. He glanced over to see Oro grinning like an idiot, and it was all he could do to stop from slapping it off his face.

And then they all stopped what they were doing. Voices. Down the hall.

Rendra jiggled her lockpick-the it refused to come out of the lock. She looked down the corridor, past the point where Vakir could see, and then yanked at the lockpick with all her might, pulling it free with a loud scraping sound.

"Maex, " said a voice, the owner of which remained out of Vakir's sight. By Rendra's shifting gaze, he could tell that whoever it was was coming toward her.

Minister Pon Svale came into view. "Thank you for giving yourself up. I thought you might try something this stupid. But then again, you fell completely for my little game. "

Rendra assumed a casual stance. "I have to admit. Svale. You got me. Played on my fears and my ethics, knowing the whole time that I would be too preoccupied with both to realize what you were doing, "

Svale issued a satisfied chuckle. "I'm not brilliant, but I am thorough. "

"I just don't understand why you went to all that trouble. "

"Please, Maex, I've studied you long enough to know you're not that incompetent. "

"Well, frankly, I'm beginning to think you're insane. "

The remark did not sit well with Svale. His thin smile changed quickly to a sneer. "I don't know what you're trying to pull, but if you think it can get you out of this, you're the one who is insane. You are a dozen meters below the surface, surrounded on all sides by thousands of troops loyal to me. I don't know how you got in here, but I do know how you're going out. "

Rendra said nothing. Neither did Vakir or Oro. But Svale continued.

"Now that you have completed your assignment. I have been appointed First Minister of Defense, second only to Uli himself. It was I who urged him to wear a personal shield, even though he thought it a politically incorrect thing to do. But thanks to the attack on his life-courtesy of me-I was able to prove him wrong. "

He pulled a slim device from his front pocket and clicked one of its protrusions. The cell opposite Vakir's and Oro's opened, and Svale motioned for her to enter.

Rendra stoo'd her ground.

"Please, let's not make this any messier than it already it is. " And with that he drew a blaster from his hip.

She acquiesced finally, moving into the cell with a look of defeat on her face.

"Make peace with your makers. You will be executed tomorrow after your trial. " Svale gave the aliens one last look and then returned down the corridor.

The espionage droid floated into view.

"It worked, " Rendra whispered. "Now get back to the ship. Nopul has to take it from here. "

Vakir and Oro looked to one another, but neither seemed to have any understanding of what had just taken place right in front of them.

"Don't worry, " Rendra said from across the way as the droid hovered out of sight. "I'll fill you in later. If Nopul's slicing skills are as good as he says, we should have at least a slight chance of getting out of this. "

Vakir didn't know how Oro was taking the news, but to him. that didn't sound as promising as he would have liked.

* * *

Nopul swiveled the cockpit chair one more time. That made six hundred and twenty-eight revolutions, and he'd still not heard a word from Rendra.

He'd set the ship's comm system to the METOSP channel after she'd left. According to the updates, all of Sriluur had erupted into chaos. No vessels were being allowed to lift off until flight control could determine whether the threat had passed.

Threat? Nopul thought. Trust me, there's no longer a threat.

He glanced over at the exterior ocular sensor display for a quick look-and then stopped to stare at the squad of armed security guards marching straight for the Zoda.

This was it. The end. All his hopes and aspirations dashed over the course of a few hours. Well, for what it was worth, he wasn't going to let it end so neatly.

With his last embers of vigor, he sprang from the chair and pulled a blaster rifle out of the cockpit weapons locker. He checked the charge and found it three-quarters full. He gave a nervous chuckle: the weapon would probably last longer than he would.

With a stride infused with the power of imminent death, he headed for the airlock. Before he hit the release, he took a deep breath, guesstimating the time it would take for the patrol to reach the ship but before they were in a readied position.

He exhaled quickly and-before he let his common sense inform him of his insanity-jammed the airlock control with his elbow. As the door hissed open, he hefted the blaster rifle and took up an offensive stance. He began to ease the blaster's trigger, just enough so that he knew he'd get off the first shot.

When the airlock had fully opened to reveal the open-air bay to the starboard of the Zoda, he was alarmed at what he saw.

Nothing. Where had they gone? Around to the other side of the ship? Were they laying in wait for him to poke out his head so they could blast him into a million pieces without exposing themselves?

When no one appeared to answer his questions, he eased forward down the ramp, careful not to break the plane of the hull. To test the waters, he shoved the muzzle of the rifle outside.

No response.

Which didn't do much to settle his nerves. Maybe they were smarter than he was. No, he didn't like this one bit.

Realizing he had no other option-the ocular sensor unit was fixed on an aft view-he poked his head out and glanced in both directions, fully expecting not to live long enough to perceive the information his eyes absorbed.

So he was completely surprised to find himself unharmed in the next moment, the squad of security guards getting smaller as they headed for another ship a few dozen meters away.

Nopul took in a sweet breath. The adrenaline, though now unneeded, still coursed through him, making his hands-and in turn, the blaster rifle-shake. The movement woke him out of his respite and he scuttled back up the ramp and hit the locking mechanism. He left the airlock to shut by itself as he headed to the cockpit.

When he got there he saw the incoming message light blinking. That was the signal. He grabbed his slicer tools, thought twice about leaving the blaster rifle behind, and finally headed off without it. He had a lot to do. Rendra, Oro, and Vakir were counting on him. He couldn't take the risk of carrying a lethal weapon. If he were arrested or even detained for a few moments, all of them, including himself, would lose their lives. And that would definitely not make his day.

* * *

Sriluur's yellow sun blazed down on Rendra from its position just to the morning side of the sky's zenith. She'd been too busy to notice how bright it was yesterday, but now, chained to a makeshift pillar on the dais in the center of the Coliseum floor, she didn't have the option of missing out on that bit of information.

Next to her, Oro, Vakir and some other alien she didn't recognize-apparently caught up in the same political machinations-looked on as First Minister Pon Svale continued to congratulate himself on capturing the would-be assassins and to deride her and her companions for their evil intentions. She wished she could show him some evil. Luckily for him there were two meters of durasteel chain holding her back.

She'd already suffered through half an hour of being pelted with everything from stones to sour vegetables-she was pretty sure one of the gourd-like fruits had broken a couple of ribs-and now the ceremony seemed to be coming to an end.

Where in the stars was Nopul? Time-at least hers and her companions'-was quickly becoming a rare commodity.

"Traitors like these, " Svale went on, "must be purged from both our systems if this new alliance is to flourish. " The crowd responded with a raucous cheer.

Vakir, who was closest to her, glanced toward her. "You sure Nopul can handle this?"

"Would I lay all of our lives on the line if I thought he couldn't?" She hoped her forceful tone would cover up the fact that she had no idea what Nopul was capable of. She knew nothing about computer slicing-she'd left that all to him-and so she hadn't ever been able to gauge his level of ability.

But Vakir seemed to buy into it. "I cannot wait to see this man, " he threw a disgusted look in Svale's direction, "fall from his high promontory and be trampled upon by his own people. "

Rendra, even in the midst of her current situation-and then again, perhaps precisely because of it-found herself grinning. "You and me both. "

The roar of the masses seated and standing throughout the Coliseum-there seemed to be more here today than yesterday, a sad comment on sentient nature, she supposed-died down, and Svale regarded them all in silence, building up dramatic tension to elicit the greatest response from what he was about to say, which Rendra, unfortunately, could guess word for word.

Come on, Nopul. I have faith in you. More than I have in myself at this point. But you're just about out of time.

"Send these... insidious demons, " Svale said, his voice booming over the amplifiers placed throughout the arena, "to their makers!"

The throngs cheered, whistled, clapped, and stomped, making enough noise to drown out the last syllable of Svale's decree. Four soldiers detached from their unit and walked across the dais, each taking up a position next to one of the guilty, placing blasters against the temples of their victims.

Rendra looked to the vidscreens around the Coliseum. They switched from a focus on Svale to the quartet of soldiers with their blasters held ready for the killing blow. Come on, Nopul. Come on.

And then every vidscreen in the arena erupted in static. Rendra's heart leaped. Almost. You almost have it.

She glanced at Svale, who was basking in the vengeance of the crowd. He nodded to the soldiers, who then turned their attention to Rendra and her fellow captives.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw movement high above, and she looked up to see the image of Pon Svale on the vidscreen-but this time he was standing in an underground corridor, not on the dais in full sunlight. Nopul had done it.

But as she turned to the soldier about to end her life, she realized it might be too late. No one was paying any attention to the vidscreens. They were all focused on the execution about to take place in front of them.

"Hey!" she found herself yelling at the Weequay soldier. "Look! Look at the vidscreen!" He responded only with a confused expression.

"You can kill me in two seconds. Just please look at the vidscreens. "

He thought for a beat, and then threw a side-long glance across his shoulder. And didn't look back.

His fellow executioners-apparently his subordinates-hesitated as well, unsure why their leader had failed to carry out his task. They, too, looked to the vidscreens.

The audience booed and hissed-and then, amazingly, fell silent as they noticed the scene playing on the massive screens.

"But thanks to the attack on his life-courtesy of me, " Svale's recorded image was saying, "I was able to prove him wrong. "

Minister Aaregil raced to the podium. "Stop the execution. We cannot send these people to their deaths until we have investigated this new evidence. " Svale was too far from the microphone to be picked up, but Rendra could see by his angry expression and exaggerated gestures that he was not taking Aaregil's announcement well. Aaregil said nothing in response, but after a few moments under Svale's barrage, he motioned for security to take the First Minister into custody. A half-dozen security guards cut off her view of him, and she turned her attention to the soldier who had been about to end her life. "Thank you, " she said, but he ignored the comment. Aaregil walked up to her. "Even if this datatape can be verified, you're still in a lot of trouble. " She wanted to tell him that she didn't care, but before she could utter a word, he headed off.

She looked over to see Vakir hyperventilating-but alive-and she rested her head against the pillar. Step one accomplished. We might go to jail for fifty years, but at least we 're not going to die today.

As the adrenaline faded from her body, she started to wonder whether that was a good or a bad thing.

* * *

Two long months later, Rendra, Nopul. Vakir. Oro, and even Scrud (Oro had named the espionage droid in his native tongue, though none of them could decipher from his explanations what exactly the word translated to in Basic), stood before the Zoda in its open-air docking bay on Sriluur.

"I don't like it, " Nopul said. "The colors don't match. "

"It was either this or stay in the detention center for the rest of our lives. " Rendra said, for what she guessed was the hundredth time.

"Yeah, I know. But why do we have to have the symbol of the Houk-Weequay Alliance painted across the side of our ship? It's not going to help us carry out these missions. "

"Aaregil said something about establishing a reputation, having a presence... the usual political stuff. "

Nopul grunted as he smoothed back the twin lines of hair running across his scalp. Over the years, Rendra had learned that the gesture meant he'd accepted what he'd been told, but still wasn't happy about it. "So what's our first mission? Escort duty for a fruit transport?"

Rendra eyed the datapad in her hands. "Not exactly. "

* * *

"I just gave you a perfect shot!" Rendra screamed into her headset as she rolled the Zoda to evade a line of incoming laser fire. "What happened?"

"Missed, " was Oro's simple response. If he'd been in the cockpit with her, she'd have smacked him on the back of the head. Luckily for him he was an entire deck away in the belly turret.

"They're coming around again. Two fighters at... one-twenty mark forty-four, " Nopul said, his eyes glued to the sensor console in front of him. He turned toward her. "How long does this agreement with the Houk-Weequay Alliance last, anyway?"

Before she could answer, the Zoda shuddered as the pirate ships battered her with a barrage of laser bolts. Rendra responded to the attack by pulling up into a new vector, ninety degrees divergent from the last. "You don't want to know. "

"That long, huh?"

"Oro, Vakir!" Rendra shouted over the headset. "It'd help me out a lot if you'd hit something. "

"Pirate starfighters, pyramid formation, " Nopul announced. "Ninety-two mark seven and coming in fast. "

"All shields to starboard flank. Oro and Vakir, fire at will!" She took the Zoda into a dangerous maneuver, heading straight for the enemy fighters. "And boys, I really mean it this time. "

"How are we going to do this?" Maglenna asked, shielding her eyes in the afternoon sun. She and Major Haathi were sitting on a ratty service blanket at the edge of the forest.

Above them, the sky was turning a brownish-purple with the onset of evening; beyond them lay the object of their latest mission—an Imperial supply depot under heavy construction, tucked behind a network of impassable obstacles. First there was a three-story, fully-charged mesh-link fence surrounding the property; then there was a suspicious expanse of freshly-dug earth; then there was a massive hill, whose sides had been blasted away until they were glass-smooth and whose top was covered in heavy-laser turrets; and finally there was the depot itself, an assorted group of duracrete buildings situated next to what was supposed to be a tiny landing strip. Except that the tiny landing strip was now a massive network of landing pads, with a steady stream of freighters and starships coming and going. From there, Major Haathi's team was supposed to hijack a super freighter filled with supplies.

Two weeks earlier, Haathi had come up with a brilliant plan to get inside. However, that was when she had been under the impression that Alliance intelligence reports were correct.

"So, General Madine, are you sure the surveillance reports are accurate?" "Oh, surely, Major!" Haathi said, opening up a large cold-storage medkit and rummaging around. "'There's no security! Just a little two-meter mesh fence, two guards, and about a hundred construction workers!' 'Wow, thank you, sir!'"

Maglenna said nothing. She hadn't worked with Haathi for very long, but so far she had observed that whenever Haathi started ranting, it meant she was thinking. Which, according to legend, was often a very dangerous thing.

Morgan didn't seem to think so. She was sitting in a collapsible chair at the top of a small hill, just beyond Maglenna and Haathi. Her jacket was around her waist and she was leaning back, wearing mirrorshades, taking in the sun. Maglenna envied Morgan's unflagging trust in whatever Haathi did.

Currently Haathi was taking large metal cylinders out of the medkit and setting them in front of her on the blanket.

"What do we do now?" Maglenna asked her.

Haathi waved one of the cylinders. "This part of the plan stays the same. We get into the low-security portion exactly the way we planned."

"And once we get in? Assuming we get in... How do we get into the high-security sector?"

"I'm working on it." She offered the cylinder to Maglenna. "Savareen brandy?"

"No, thank you—"

Haathi set it down in front of Maglenna and poured the thick, clear contents into the lid. "Then just leave it there for effect."

"Major—"

"T'Charek."

"T'Charek. I know I haven't been a member of this team very long, but—"

"You're already the best medtech we've had. Our last one would be running for home about now."

"Well, frankly, that's crossed my mind."

"Hey, mine, too." Haathi opened a couple of metal containers and emptied their sloppy brown contents onto a plate.

"What is that stuff?"

"Takeout," Haathi said, shoving a plate at Maglenna. The food gave off a strong, moldy smell, and Maglenna declined to pick up the fork that Haathi chucked at her. "I think it's supposed to be a knockoff of some Rodian dish."

A short distance behind Maglenna, there was a sound of twigs breaking, and several voices.

Maglenna tried not to notice; the voices had been anticipated. They were an important part of the original plan.

"T'Charek," Maglenna said. "There's something I've been wanting to ask you."

"Now?" a deep voice said, from up in the trees.

"No," Morgan replied without looking up.

"What do you want to know?" Haathi asked Maglenna, tossing three more plates onto the blanket as if she were dealing cards.

"Shouldn't I have gotten more training?"

Haathi sipped the brandy. "Interesting question."

"I'm only saying, I went straight from receiving my orders to preparing for this mission. Shouldn't I have been sent to comlink school, or advanced blaster training, or—"

"You're in school now," Haathi said.

"Seriously. Come on, now," Maglenna said. She had been trying very hard not to get exasperated, but Haathi's seat-of-her-pants technique had already exceeded the crazy rumors Maglenna had been hearing about Special Ops leaders in general. Still, Maglenna didn't like hearing herself complain. "Don't be afraid to sound patronizing," she told Haathi. "I have to learn somehow."

Haathi set down the last of the plates and looked right at Maglenna. Haathi's eyes were her only serious features; the rest of her was always melted into some chair or slouching against some doorframe, one arm raised to emphasize some irreverent point she was making, and the other dangling laconically. And half a grin on her face at all times. You got the impression that you could go right up to her anytime and she'd want to sit down with you, talk with you, buy you a drink. But when she trained her black eyes on you and stared, you suddenly felt as though there weren't enough room in the whole galaxy to hide from her. You could be a rookie pilot or you could be a general. You just shrank away. Which Maglenna did, even as Haathi calmly said, "Maglenna, you do not need to be patronized."

"Now?" the voice in the trees said again.

"No," Morgan said.

"Listen," Haathi said, mercifully diverting her eyes to the cooler for a second, "I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, 'Oh, dear, my C.O. has lost her little mind because she's still going to try to get inside.' The fact is, it doesn't matter how well you plan. Something always..." She glanced over Maglenna's shoulder. "Here we go."

Maglenna started, but she didn't turn around; the voices had been getting gradually closer, and now they stopped. For a few seconds everything was dead quiet, except for a few birds chirping in the distance. Maglenna's back twitched.

Then Morgan spoke in a jarringly cheerful tone. "Hi, boys!"

"Ma'am," said one of the voices. Maglenna turned around; five Imperial army troopers—a sergeant, three privates, and a corporal—stood about 10 meters behind her, blaster rifles slung around their backs.

The sergeant removed his hat.

"Afternoon, ladies," he said.

"Gentlemen," Haathi said. Maglenna forced a pleasant smile and held out the brandy lid in the lieutenant's direction.

"No, thank you," he said. "Mind telling me what you're doing here?"

"What, is it private property?"

"Ma'am, you're a mite close to a restricted area."

"But we're not in it, are we?"

"No, ma'am."

Haathi demonstratively set down her fork. She widened her black eyes, which were suddenly all innocence and no threat.

"Listen, uh...General?"

He chuckled. "Sergeant."

"Sergeant, we promise we'll clean everything up when we go. I know there's designated picnic areas by the lake, but it's so lush right here. It's getting so you can't go anyplace where there's trees and grass anymore, you know? These days it's all, 'plow it down, build a city, who cares about nature.' Well, you know what? I care!"

"Okay, okay, don't get excited. I'm just informing you that if you go any further beyond the hill where your pretty friend is sitting—"
Morgan shyly waggled her fingers at him— "then we'll have to escort you out of the woods. For your own safety, you understand."

"Are you guys police?" Morgan asked.

"Kind of."

One of the privates spoke. "What are you girls having?"

"Did you want some?" Haathi asked.

"Oh, no, that's okay—"

"No, really! Have some supper! I made this myself." She held up a plate, oozing over with Rodian food.

The sergeant squinted. "Looks like takeout."

"What? I slaved over this all morning!"

"I'll have some," the corporal said, stepping forward a couple of paces.

Haathi leaned suggestively against the medkit. "Just you?" she asked.

The other four soldiers stepped forward.

Morgan said, "Now."

There was a rustling of leaves and a light clicking noise from the tree Morgan had been addressing, and a few leaves shook to the ground; then, all five of the Imperial officers clapped their hands to their necks almost simultaneously.

"Hey! Something bit me—" one of them shouted, and then fell to the ground along with the others.

A few moments later, Captain Jayme swung down to the tree's lowest branch, his face smeared with green paint and his new rifle strapped to his back, and dropped to the ground.

"Geez!" he said. "I thought they'd never stand together!" He tossed the rifle, a light little carbine assembly, at Morgan. "It pulls to the left," he said. "Fix it."

"Hey!" Morgan cried, almost tripping over her feet to catch it. "Be careful! This is not one of your mongrel assembly-line blasters! It's fragile!"

Haathi got to her feet and surveyed the officers, whose pulses were already being assessed by Maglenna. She crouched down by each one, placed a hand on each neck, and gingerly felt around. Everyone was warm, but their hearts were pumping nice and slow.

"They're all out," she said.

Haathi shook her head. "People like that should not be allowed into restricted areas." She looked up. "Maglenna, get their stuff. Jayme, you get our stuff. Morgan, help me dispose of our picnic here."

Maglenna hesitated; if there was a process to stripping downed enemy forces, she didn't know what it was. But, she figured the team probably needed everything. She got their jackets, their pants, their belts, their holsters, their boots, and in each breast pocket there was an Ident badge.

Jayme appeared next to her as she slipped into the corporal's jacket. "You need this," he said, and strapped her into a black shoulder holster containing a brand-new holdout blaster. This was her weapon of choice and Jayme had spent the past two weeks teaching her how to use it properly. She had already been trained in marksmanship when she first joined the Alliance, but Jayme had insisted that she know how to enter a room, how to move with cover fire, how to disarm an opponent, how to take stairs and corridors. He made her take her blaster apart and put it back together several times while the team was in hyperspace.

Nobody made any attempt to disguise that she had a medkit, although this one was Imperial-issue and had been acquired for the Rebellion long ago. It also had a DL-44 blaster sitting heavily in the bottom. Jayme's insistence, again.

Within minutes, everyone was armed and ready. Morgan and Haathi had rolled the remains of the picnic—and the uniform of the fifth Imperial trooper—into the blanket, and stuffed the whole package into a large receptacle that said, "Thank You for Keeping Our Woods Clean" at the base of the hill. The troopers were left by the receptacle, all linked together by their own restraining binders. Haathi led the team a short distance into the woods, where the

Imperials' patrol speeder was waiting.

"I'm driving," Jayme announced.

Maglenna looked in the direction of the garrison again. The sky was turning dark blue with the onset of dusk, and the garrison still seemed flat, but this time in a harmless way. "Wow," she said to Haathi. "I can't wait to see what you've planned to do once we get inside."

"I'm kind of curious myself," Haathi said, hopping into the front passenger seat. "Drive on, Jayme."



Haathi didn't tell Maglenna, but she was just as worried about the mission. It wasn't that she was afraid she couldn't come up with a plan; she still didn't have one, but she was fully confident that one would show up very soon. Things rarely went smoothly if she planned too much, because the only thing you could rely on in Special Ops was that you couldn't rely on things going according to plan. But Maglenna would just have to see that for herself.

They'd already gotten past the buzzing, three-story fence using the sergeant's ident badge; now they needed to get past the guard at the front gate, and that was going to take some work.

Haathi turned around to face Maglenna. "I want to congratulate you," she said above the rumble of the engines, "on the role you're about to fill in your first mission."

Maglenna leaned forward to hear. "But I don't know what it is!" she called.

Haathi just gave a knowing smile and turned back around. They were driving along a ready-made path that fully skirted the minefield and the sheer hill, and appeared that it would lead them straight to the guardhouse on the minimum-security side of the depot.

No, the real worry was not the mission. The real worry was Haathi's teammates. Maglenna, for one, seemed to have an increasingly difficult time remembering why she had become member of this team in the first place, but Haathi considered herself very good at picking out the talented oddballs of the Alliance. Although few people would realize it, Maglenna was probably the oddest of them all; she was as well-manicured as a surgeon, but she had insisted on

going through basic military training when she had first joined the Rebellion. She seemed to thrive on rules, yet nobody could quite pigeonhole her into any known position. She was a diplomat from Alderaan, yet having lost her whole planet to the Empire gave her an edge far beyond that of your average bitter young recruit. Beyond all this, however, Haathi didn't really know what Maglenna was capable of, as an operative, and although Maglenna was asking all the right questions, it remained to be seen how well she performed under fire.

She did know what Jayme and Morgan were capable of, but she was concerned about them, too. Really concerned.

She looked over at Jayme, whose thick forearms were sticking uncomfortably out of his Imperial-issue sleeves and whose Imperial cap was perched at the back of his shaved head. He glanced in her direction. "Yeah, you look real Imperial," she said, giving him an exaggerated thumbs-up.

He gave her an amused snort. "As opposed to you."

"I'm working on that." She dipped a finger into the canister of Jayme's green camouflage field paint, and started smearing it all over her blue face. "I'll tell them I was hunting or something."

Jayme gave a quick smile. "That'll convince them."

"Listen," she said. "I've, uh...been meaning to ask...are you okay?"

"Great. Why?"

As if he had to ask. Three weeks earlier he and Morgan had both almost gotten killed by a rogue assassin droid. Jayme had fallen two stories down an turbolift shaft under construction; Morgan had gotten electrocuted when the droid threw her into the main power grid of a YT-1300. Haathi's YT-1300. And Maglenna had almost been a victim, too, although at the time she wasn't a member of Haathi's team. Everyone had spent a week aboard a medical frigate and Haathi passed most of that time waiting to hear whether Jayme had suffered any cranial damage when he fell, or whether Morgan had gone back into cardiac arrest, or whether Maglenna had any sudden growths in her lungs from breathing too much toxic smoke. Haathi herself had breathed enough of it that they'd stuck her on a ventilator for six hours.

So Maglenna could worry all she wanted about the mission. That was irrelevant. Haathi just knew that there would come some other day when somebody would get hurt on her watch, and she wouldn't be there to stop it from happening.

Haathi turned around to face the back seat. Morgan's attention was focused on a datapad. She was wearing a private's uniform with the cap on backwards.

"Morg, could you at least try to look Imperial?"

"Oh, come on, T'Charek," Morgan said without looking up.

"Dress is not casual. At least put your hair up."

"Okay, okay, just a second." Morgan held up a small, blaster-shaped holocam with her free hand. "Now look at me like I just spilled fizzyglug on the main console in *The Maker*."

Haathi gave her a horrible glare, and the camera buzzed.

"Perfect." Morgan looked up. "You can stop glowering now."

"I'm still recovering from that terrifying image you just put in my head," Haathi told her.

"Relax. I got most of it out."

Haathi felt her heart seize. "What?"

"I'm kidding. Okay, Maglenna, look nasty—"

"Morgan, so help me, if I find a drop of fizzyglug anywhere

remotely close to my cockpit—“

“Quiet down, all,” Jayme said. Haathi turned back around; the front gate was about thirty meters ahead. It was your average military base entrance: a guy in a uniform sitting in a tiny duracrete office, saluting incoming and outgoing vehicles all day.

“Morg, you got those badges ready?” Jayme asked.

“Look at me as if I’m Colonel Stijhl,” she said. He glanced over his shoulder; the camera buzzed. “Good,” Morgan said. “I just need about thirty seconds.”

“Make it two,” Haathi said. Morgan handed her a plastic ident badge. It had the serial number of the sergeant, whose uniform Haathi was wearing; it also had Haathi’s picture on it, with a light-flesh-colored face in place of a bluish, paint-smeared one.

Jayme looked at his. “These are very nice pictures, Morgan.”

“Thank you.” Morgan pointed the camera at herself, turned her cap back around, stuffed her long brown hair up under it, and looked menacing until the shot was taken. “Would you like a copy of yours for your mom, Jayme?”

“No. She gets mad at me when I don’t smile for the camera.”

“You might also have trouble explaining why you defected back,” Haathi said.

They pulled up next to the guard’s office. He leaned out the window and looked them over. Jayme flashed his ident badge, and the others straightened up in their seats.

“Patrol 1138, proceed,” the guard said, offering a bored salute.

They were in. Until the real patrol was discovered, they could roam around this portion of the base all they wanted. To the left of the gate was a dull gray sign, sprouting out of a clump of scrub grass, that said, “Welcome to Zonith Field” in electric orange letters, and in black letters, “Future home of Laertos Supply and Support Garrison. Please excuse our mess—we are busy building a better tomorrow!” All around were nice residential buildings, trees bedded in duracrete islands, official buildings flanked by mounds of soft dirt marking lawns-to-be.

“Isn’t this nice,” Haathi said. “I feel at home already.” She pulled a flat metal box out of the bag at her feet.

Maglenna leaned forward. “What’s that?”

“My treasure box,” Haathi told her. She showed Maglenna what was inside: dozens of red, blue, and yellow Imperial rank insignia bars.

“Okay, let’s see now,” Haathi said, rummaging around. “What

would you like to be?" She pulled out a square-shaped gray insignia piece with a row of four red bars atop a row of four blue bars. "I fancy you a major, Major—" She looked at Maglenna's ident badge—"Eckhord."

Maglenna absently took it, and replaced her lieutenant bars with it. "You wouldn't rather be in charge?" she asked Haathi.

"Maybe later on I'll be a colonel, if it suits me. For now I need you to look like you're the one in charge."

"How do I—"

"Relax. I'll still be ordering you around."

"Where to, T'Charek?" Jayme asked.

"The admin building. Very light security."

"Yeah? What's going on?"

Haathi addressed Maglenna. "You wanted some training? Here's some training. Rule One: Stupid plans are only stupid if they don't work."

"You have a plan?" Maglenna asked.

"Would you believe I do?"



The admin building was a T-shaped, beige-colored building with slits instead of windows and large, wide stairs heralding the entrance. Maglenna adjusted her major's insignia and wondered if she would have been working at the Alliance equivalent of this place if she hadn't gotten taken into Special Ops. At this point it was hard to tell which was worse.

Jayme parked the repulsor and everyone piled out, and at Haathi's order, Maglenna led them all up the steps. They walked straight inside, across the black-floored lobby which didn't have any furniture yet, and flashed their badges at the front desk which didn't really have a desktop yet. The clerk gave Haathi a strange look, but let them proceed past him to a bank of freight turbolifts.

"Maglenna, you know admin. Where's the main computer filing system going to be?" Haathi asked.

"Sub-level," Maglenna said.

"And," she said, feeling knowledgeable for the first time all day, "they're going to be a lot more careful about security down there."

"Good to know," Haathi said thoughtfully.

The turbolift spit them out in a large, warehouse-looking area. There were chunks of floor missing and a fine duracrete mist in the

"Hey!" the pudgy guard yelled. "You grunts leave that stuff alone!"

air, and the sound of power-hammering somewhere in the distance. Along the walls and scattered all across the floor were pieces of office furniture, and at the far wall was a sealed blast door flanked by two guards who hadn't noticed anybody come into the basement just yet.

Suddenly Maglenna thought of something. Her mind hadn't really registered what it was, but she had a feeling it might be better that way, and she ducked behind a stray console unit, heart pounding. "Distract them," she said, hunching herself over and half-walking, half-crawling to the far end of the console, toward the guards.

Behind her, the others started crashing furniture around. Maglenna darted behind a stack of flimsy chairs, and then a large desk. She peered around the side. Both guards were about 10 meters away from her now, one pudgy and one tall, each with a look of pure exasperation on his face.

"Hey!" the pudgy guard yelled. "You grunts leave that stuff alone!"

They ventured a few steps away from the blast doors, which had "Computer Operations— Sublevel One" painted on them.

"But we're just moving it out of here," Morgan said.

"Get lost, private! I mean it! This is a restricted area!"

Morgan went off on a detailed explanation about orders. She was almost inaudible over the sound of Jayme and Haathi yanking the bottom furniture piece out of every stack, but Maglenna recognized the drone of Morgan's voice in the throes of technobabble. Interesting tranquilization tactic, Maglenna thought.

The guards went further away from the door, shouting over Morgan's lecture. Maglenna took a quick step in front of the blast doors. She thought about how Jayme held himself when he got himself planted in somebody's way, and how Haathi had looked at her earlier, and then she cleared her throat.

"Gentlemen," she said quietly, arms folded across her chest.

Both of them turned around and then instantly stepped backward.

"I asked Ordnance to send some people over to move things in there," Maglenna said, pointing at the doors. "I take it you'd prefer to move it yourself?"

"We weren't informed," the tall one said.

"Oh, I'm sorry, was I supposed to clear insignificant tasks with you?"

"Nuh—no, Major," the fat one said.

"If I have to spend one more day sitting on the floor looking at these—" She waved her arm. "Hideously underdecorated walls, I may have myself an aneurysm, and we don't want that."

The guards seemed to consider that for a second, but they said, "No, ma'am."

"Because then I might have to throw something! Like this chair!" She kicked the nearest desk chair, which had wheels and shot clear across the room. It smashed into a tall stack of smaller chairs, which fell to the ground with a loud, teeth-jarring clatter. Maglenna cringed; she hadn't meant to do that.

The guards, however, blanched, and ran back to the door.

Haathi and the others—all carrying some piece of furniture—waved their ident badges, which the tall guard barely acknowledged as he and the other guard went for the door control button at the same time, each pounding the other's hand.

Maglenna ushered the team inside. "Don't let it happen again!"

she shouted over her shoulder, and marched inside herself.

When the doors shut behind her, she felt something entirely new; a mad rush of adrenaline.

"You're a little too good at this Imperial thing, Major," Jayme said, placing a congratulatory arm around her shoulder.

"It's the boots," she told him.

They were standing in a brightly-lit corridor with transparisteel walls. There was another door in front of them, and through the walls they could see that this led to the main computer room: a huge, dimly-lit area with catwalks and computer terminals around the edges, a high ceiling, and red-lighted control panels dueling with blue-screened monitors to be the only light source in the room. Scores of Imperial techs wove around each other with datapads or hunched over their terminals, an army of pale underground creatures who never saw daylight.

Haathi found a nearby closet full of cleaning supplies, where she tossed the painting she was carrying. "Who wants to hear my plan?" she asked.

Morgan raised her hand.

"That was a rhetorical question, Morg."

"I knew that."

"Wanna know how we're going to breach the maximum-security death sector of the garrison?"

Everyone looked at her expectantly.

"We're not," she said.

"What?" Jayme said.

"But we're gonna make them think we did."



Captain Mylesgood of the Imperial Security Bureau was slouched in his office chair, looking out the massive transparisteel window that took up the entire far wall, when he heard the door slide open behind him. He barely acknowledged the sound, because his attention was on the scene in front of him. Everything outside was in chaos. The old admin building had been torn down and replaced by some ugly duracrete thing with no windows; the old landing strip was being replaced by a massive network of landing pads, and his view, his beautiful view of the woods and the mountains, was being replaced by a view of the four-story duracrete wall that divided his side of the base from the new, sleek, maximum security side, where short little black buildings nestled around the base of one tall security tower. Mylesgood couldn't see the chief of security's office from where he was sitting, but he knew the window over there was twice as big as his.

"Captain? Sir?" A woman's voice. Sergeant Chambers, his aide. "Am I interrupting you?"

"He's watching me, Chambers," Mylesgood said.

"Who?"

Mylesgood pointed out the window. "Tenko. You know, the general."

"He's watching you, sir?"

"He's watching me out of that big, huge office right now. He's thinking about all the little white stormtroopers who are going to come down and fill his security tower and send people like you and me out to little nothing planets with little nothing assignments."

Mylesgood turned around; Chambers was rocking expectantly back and forth on the balls of her feet. "We made this base, Chambers! We owned this planet without the planet even knowing! Now Vader and Palpatine have to advertise to the whole bloody galaxy where the Empire is."

"It's a new universe, sir," Chambers said.

"That's what they said when I enlisted. Except in a different tone of voice."

"Sir, there's something I need to speak to you about."

"Can't it wait?"

"Until you're finished brooding, sir? No."

Mylesgood sighed. "I'm going to miss you, Chambers."

"Thank you, sir. Listen, we have a problem."

"Which is what?"

"Patrol 1138 never reported in."

For the first time Mylesgood looked directly into Chambers' eyes, which were unusually perplexed. "A whole patrol disappeared?" he asked.

"No, they came in through the front gate about a half hour ago. They just never reported in."

Mylesgood drummed all of his fingers on the desk.

"It may just be some drunken incident again," Chambers said.

"Do you want me to issue a general alert?"

Mylesgood turned around in his chair, looked at the tall security tower again, and turned back around. "No, Chambers. We'll handle this entirely ourselves."

"Okay, sir, if you say so."

"Don't you want to know why?"

"I figured you'd tell me."

"Because if this is just a drunken incident, I don't want General Discontent over there using it as an excuse to remind everyone what a bunch of backwater hicks used to run this place."

"And if it's not?"

"Then it's terrorists. And in that event, I'm going to see that you and I and the rest of the agents get so many commendations, we'll build another Death Star out of them and make Vader serve us brunch on Coruscant."

"Sir?"

"In other words, I'm going to find these people and I'm going to make them wish they were dealing with an entire battalion of

stormtroopers." He stood up. "Send my repulsor around. Inform the troops to set their rifles to kill, but make sure they save one or two perpetrators for me to—how shall we say—interview."

"Very good, sir," Chambers said, and the two of them left the office in a hurry.



Morgan was leaning one-handed against the four-story duracrete wall that divided their zone from the maximum security zone. Running across the top of the wall were two thick, highly-charged cables, obviously because it was smarter to go over the wall than through it. Typical Imperial delusion.

She looked down at Jayme, kneeling next to her. They were in almost complete darkness, with the odd searchlight occasionally playing across the wall about a meter above them. "What's the blast zone gonna be?" he asked, pulling a couple of palm-sized, square-shaped charges from his bag.

"I knew that was a rhetorical question," she said.

"What?"

"Back in the file room. I knew T"Charek was being rhetorical."

"Okay, good, Morg, but tell me what you think about—"

"See, I know you people think I'm clueless, but I'm not."

Jayme affixed a charge to the wall, about a foot off the ground. "I need a calculation, Morg."

"Of what?"

"Gimme blast radius and minimum safe distance from here."

"Approximately?"

"Yeah. Just a rough guess."

Morgan shut her eyes. An equation flashed in front of her, but she didn't consciously acknowledge what it was. She opened her eyes and looked out at the compound, which bustled a little less now that it was nearly dark. "Fifty-one point three seven four meters," she said.

"Why point three seven four?"

"The wind, Jayme, the wind!"

"Oh. Right."

Morgan could never understand how she had gained a reputation for being spacey when what she really did was pay closer attention to detail than anyone else. Jayme could have made that calculation, she thought, if he had wanted to apply himself. His problem, and everyone else's, was that they didn't know that sitting down and calculating until you were numb was a complete waste of time. You just had to let the answers come to you.

"Okay," Jayme said, handing her three charges. "Stick these just over your head, and then let's get out of here."

Morgan put the handle-end of a glow rod in her teeth and placed the charges in a horizontal row, like the top of a doorframe. Then she pulled her detonator glove out of her jacket, slid it onto her left hand, turned around, and strolled across the compound with Jayme. They both avoided the streetlights, which had kicked on about a minute earlier.

**"Hands up now,
nice and slow!
Get down on the
ground!" the
sergeant yelled.**

"Does T'Charek seem a little edgy to you lately?" Morgan asked.

"She almost lost her whole team," Jayme said. "It's going to haunt her for a while."

"Yeah, but it wasn't her fault."

"That doesn't matter to her. Besides, anything like that makes you assess your mortality and everyone else's. Don't you feel different?"

"Nah. It started out like any other day for me—get up, brush my hair, fix the main computer grid, get electrocuted by a rogue assassin droid who thinks I'm a Hutt."

Jayme smiled. Morgan liked it when he did, because it was a relatively rare event, and she and T'Charek and Maglenna were the

only people he'd smile at. Except for the odd Imperial whom he had dead to rights.

Of course he always got incredibly serious immediately after smiling, as if he had to do penance or something for acknowledging happiness. He jerked his comlink out of his belt and spoke in a gruff voice. "Major," he said. "We're coming home."

He barely finished the sentence. The comlink was shrieking with the sound of blaster fire.

"Negative!" Haathi shouted. "I need you to—"

The channel went dead.

"Oh, great! Come on," Jayme said, breaking into a run. He and Morgan went around the corner of the post exchange, where their repulsor was waiting. And so was a squadron of men in black and gray suits with shiny black helmets, all engaged in searching the repulsor.

Morgan's stomach dipped.

"Halt!"

In one smooth maneuver, all of them trained their blaster rifles at Jayme and Morgan. "Hands up, nice and slow! Get down on the ground!" the sergeant yelled.

They raised their hands. Morgan looked at Jayme, who was staring expectantly at her.

"What?" she asked.

His eyes widened.

The sergeant shouted, "Get down! Now! Do it!"

"Ohhh, that," Morgan said. Her gloved fingers went down into her palm, first the index finger, then the ring, then the middle, twice.

There was a loud popping noise 10 meters away, as the temporary generator shed, which controlled the protective wiring on top of the wall, blew into bits. Morgan felt herself flying, and she knew she should have put her hands out and braced herself for the fall, but she kept pressing her fingers into the glove, setting off the trail of charges inside doorways and underneath repulsor trucks and finally on the giant wall itself. Somewhere Jayme was yelling something.

Morgan didn't really know what happened next. She had some vague recollection of the explosions, but she wasn't sure how they had occurred; and she thought she remembered getting up and just running, because Jayme had told her to.

However, when her head cleared, Jayme was nowhere, and she was standing with her back to an alley wall, three troopers pointing rifles in her face.

"You're coming with us, Rebel."



Twenty minutes earlier, Haathi and Maglenna had been in a very tranquil setting. The Imperial clerks acted like a bunch of overprotected, nervous pets, and didn't like to raise their voices to an audible conversational tone. Much less acknowledge the presence of majors and strange-looking sergeants. Which meant that Haathi and Maglenna could stand in the corridor all they wanted as long as they didn't run across any security types.

"How can I look official?" Maglenna whispered.

"Pretend you're at a Senate meeting, and one of Palpatine's little supporters thinks he knows everything, but you know that you own him."

Maglenna immediately assumed a ramrod-straight posture, a charming half-smirk, and a fluid, relaxed manner. Haathi was just fighting off the urge to fetch her a cocktail when a young lieutenant emerged from a group of offices down the corridor and started putting on his gray jacket.

Haathi trotted up to him. "Excuse me—" She almost called him "Son," but caught herself. "—Sir?"

He looked at her; one of his eyes was bloodshot.

"How come you're wearing camouflage paint?" he asked her.

"Recon."

"Oh."

"Sir, we're really sorry to bother you, but we need a quick favor from you."

He sighed heavily, then glanced over Haathi's shoulder and appeared to catch sight of Maglenna.

"Oh, uh, of course, Major," he said, and led them into his office. Haathi noted that all the other offices in the row were dark.

Inside, the room was entirely decorated in a soothing metallic blue, with fresh carpeting on the floor, a brand new control panel covered in construction dust, and a large stack of datapads on a box near the lieutenant's chair. When the door closed, all the outside noises disappeared. Haathi felt as if she were submerged in bath water.

"Okay, what do you need?"

"Um..." Maglenna set her datapad on the stack. "We have an

updated cargo manifest for the...the Savareen...Rodian. The Savareen Rodian. Yes."

"Hmmmyeah, gimme minute," the lieutenant said. He slid his code cylinder into the slot by the main monitor and then mindlessly typed in his personal access code. "Savareen Rodian," he said after a second. "That's a weird name."

"Isn't it?" Haathi said.

"Did I ask for editorial commentary?" Maglenna snapped, sounding almost genuinely hurt.

"Sorry. What kinda ship is it?" He reached for the datapad.

"Doesn't it say on the datapad?" Haathi asked him.

"Yes, you mean you don't know?" Maglenna said.

He looked at the pad, and then back up. "Wait a second! This isn't—" he said into the muzzle of Haathi's heavy blaster.

After she had shoved his unconscious body, still in his chair, into the corner, Haathi holstered her blaster and leaned against the control panel. "All right," she said to Maglenna. "Here's what's happening. Morgan and Jayme are waiting to hear, from me, where the most obvious place for a break-in would be, and in 10 minutes they will blow it up. Now I'm going to stand at Mr. Auxiliary Terminal over here and find out exactly where, on the other side of the dividing wall, the Imperials keep their important supplies. Then I'm going to do an absolutely horrible job of covering my tracks."

"What do I do?"

"You're going to do an absolutely brilliant job of covering my tracks."

"What about the super freighter?"

"No point, now. You get into the system and you put my new plan into motion."

"Which is?"

"Mr. Imperial Lieutenant got you into the shipping file, right?"

"Yes."

"You're going to change a few things."

"What, the schedules?"

"That's what you'd think, isn't it? That's what I'm going to make them think. You, on the other hand, are going to re-route future shipping orders. Say you run across a shipment of heavy artillery bound for some humongous Imperial fortress on, I don't know, Coruscant or someplace big."

"Yes?"

"It would be much easier for the Rebellion if that important

shipment went to little, minimum-security Rodaj—oh, golly, that's just within spitting distance of our base on Vale Four!"

Maglenna continued to look concerned, but her eyes lit up. "And this has all been processed by the Imperials already," she said.

"Yeah. It's all been pre-approved."

Maglenna set to work with an expression of diligence mixed with wonder. In a relatively short amount of time, both of them were able to plow straight through the data files, after conferring briefly about which Rebel bases were located near which Imperial bases. Haathi, for her part, concentrated her efforts on the depot; she located the areas that an inexperienced terrorist would want to sabotage, relayed them to Jayme and Morgan, and then did a deliberately sloppy job of hiding her computerized path.

Finally Haathi checked her chrono. "You about ready?" she



asked Maglenna.

"Almost," Maglenna said. "Do we still have a base on Sheshar—"

"Hey!"

Both of them whipped around, blasters drawn, to see a middle-aged warrant officer standing in the doorway.

He instantly stumbled backwards into the hall. "Security!" he yelled, reaching madly for the wall behind him. Two stun bolts went into his torso, but not before he caught the alert button with his elbow.

"Oh, man." Haathi ran out into the corridor. A hundred techs had practically jumped onto the ceiling. On the other side of the main room, through the far transparisteel wall, there was a bank of three turbolifts, which Haathi considered running for until she noticed the red lights flashing over each one.

"Security lockout!" she said to Maglenna, who was now standing next to her.

"Meaning what?"

"There will be a squad of stormtroopers down here in about two minutes. Rule two: if things are going smoothly, you're walking into an ambush!"

Maglenna was clearly fighting off her body's natural urge to panic, and holding her blaster as if she weren't sure whether she should just holster it and act casual. Her question was answered by the two guards from the main blast door, who came running in, immediately spotted the women, and started firing.



Jayme's shoulder was killing him. He had landed on the steps of the post exchange and come to just in time to see Morgan's body slam into three ISB agents. She got up; they didn't.

If he'd been a little more lucid, Jayme might have been able to help her, but as it was, he just watched in a complete stupor as Morgan staggered a short distance away from the repulsor and then activated the bag of explosives that two agents had found on the floor. Jayme blacked out again, and the next thing he knew, the repulsor was destroyed, the agents were dead, and Morgan was gone.

"T'Charek is going to kill me.

Without really thinking, Jayme grabbed the railing and pulled himself to his feet. There seemed to be a great deal of confusion around him, but he couldn't hear anything, and for a moment he wondered if his eardrums had been blown out. Then he heard a faraway voice.

"That's the other one!"

Jayme focused; it had come from a man who wasn't far away after all—a captain standing on the back deck of a repulsor that had two ISB agents in the front seat, and another manning a huge deck gun

mounted near the captain. One of the survivors of the last explosion heard the order and ran to the steps. His fists were balled and his holster was empty; evidently he and his blaster had been separated.

Jayme had the same problem. He looked from the incoming agent to the captain's repulsor to the deck gun looming over the captain's head.

"Save him for questioning!" the captain shouted.

That was all Jayme needed to hear. As the agent came up the steps, Jayme kicked him in the chest. Then he grabbed the top edges of the nearest window—which, like all the others in that building, had not yet been graced with transparisteel—and swung inside, legs first.

He put his feet down on an uneven floor that didn't have all of its tiles, and he got away from the window. This was a cavernous place with no desks, no counters, none of the luxuries it would eventually provide. If not for a power generator glowing blue against the far wall, the room would have been completely dark.

Jayme grabbed one of the long generator cables lying across the floor, strung it across the posts on either side of the front door, and waited, his eyes on the windows. About twenty seconds later a dark shape wearing a big black ISB helmet appeared at the window directly across from him; the hum of a repulsor and the captain's barking voice passed by the windows on the other side. Jayme stayed in the shadows and didn't say anything.

Suddenly two agents came barreling through the front door, blaster rifles at chest level. They gave simultaneous choking yelps as they ran throat-first into the generator cable. Jayme kicked away one rifle and took the other, and sprinted out the front door.

He still didn't know exactly where he was, but there was a throng of regular Army troops running around who were just as confused and didn't pay him any attention. He straightened up and melded right into the crowd.

Stupid, stupid, stupid, he thought as he jogged along with a bunch of soldiers who were running away from the scene of the explosion and toward a block of residences. He split off from the group and ran down a side alley. I should have stuck near her, I should have shielded her from the blast somehow....

When he turned the corner, he was still thinking about Morgan; that was how two of Mylesgood's agents stepped out of the shadows and easily got him in a choke hold.

Mylesgood's evening was looking up. Down the street, they were securing the male terrorist, and as Mylesgood got closer he could see that Kaser and Spinks were each holding onto one of the man's arms, which they were thrusting behind his back, and Shales was walking around to the man's front.

Mylesgood entertained thoughts of how to question this man. He knew just how to do it, too, just how to leave this clever fellow a quivering wreck. He pictured himself throwing the terrorist at the general's feet, and he felt a rush of the kind of excitement he hadn't felt since the days when the base was unquestionably his. That hadn't seemed like such a long time ago until right now.

The captain was on foot now, having parked the repulsor a short distance away; about a third of his squadron had been lost in the explosion, something he refused to let himself register until all this was over. The rest, including his driver, had been sent after the female terrorist, after this man at the end of the street, and after the other imposters. Wherever they were.

Shales was standing with his arms on his hips, talking in a steady voice.

"Might as well tell us, little man. If you don't, we'll just squeeze the information out of your lady friend."

The terrorist gave a low grunt, hoisted himself up by the waist, got his ankles around Shales' neck, and twisted.

Something crunched. Shales dropped, his head at a funny angle. Mylesgood heard himself give a high-pitched gasp.

Kaser and Spinks were both standing with their mouths open, and the terrorist head-butted Kaser, got his right arm free, and threw Kaser right into Spinks. Their heads conked together and they both fell to the ground.

Mylesgood was running now, blaster drawn, and he didn't stop until he was right in the man's face.

The terrorist froze.

Mylesgood stepped back. "You've been quite a troublemaker," he said.

The terrorist said nothing. His eyes took in Mylesgood, assessing him, assessing the situation.

"I've been a very patient man," Mylesgood said, demonstratively looking at his fallen agents. "But now I don't especially feel like conducting an interrogation. I don't care why you're here anymore. I do care that you're still breathing and an inordinate number of my people are not.

"Furthermore, this is still my base, contrary to popular belief, so I don't care about all the general's Army grunts running around in the streets trying to fix your mess. The general doesn't count and his men don't count. You know who counts now? You and me. You know what else counts? This blaster. Think about that now. One

blaster and two of us.”

The terrorist’s head was half-bowed, but he kept looking at Mylesgood.

Then he smiled.

Mylesgood had to respect that. He leveled his blaster at the man’s head. He would have fired, too, except that he suddenly felt a sharp little sting on his neck.

“Ow!” he said, smacking it.

Suddenly he felt extremely heavy. His legs couldn’t hold him up. He couldn’t keep the blaster in position, couldn’t even hold it anymore, and it clattered to the ground.

“Three of us,” the terrorist said.

Mylesgood looked up into the sky, up at the man standing over him. The last thing Mylesgood saw before he blacked out was a young female private in a charred and tattered uniform. She was holding a bizarre-looking pistol, which she pretended she was going to throw at the male terrorist, then handed it to him.

“The sights work just fine now, Mr. Fussy,” she said, and they walked away together.



In the computer room, there were twenty army troopers trying to fight their way around a sea of panicky clerks lunging for the back exit, and the tall guard was still firing at Haathi and Maglenna, who were standing in the office doorway.

“Rule forty-seven!” Haathi shouted over the noise. “The enemy only attacks on two occasions! One—you’re ready! Two—you’re not!”

“All right, already!” Maglenna screamed. “I’m learning! I’m with you! Improvise! No real training! Fine! Just stop quoting rules at me!”

“But they’re motivational!” Haathi yelled.

Maglenna sent a flurry of blaster shots into the hall. The tall guard took three blue bolts in the chest and collapsed.

“See?” Haathi said.

Maglenna suddenly felt an urge to collapse in hysterical laughter. Her heart was pounding and so were her ears, but underneath that, all of her senses felt sharp.

“Now come on,” Haathi said, running into the corridor. “Join the fray.”

"What fray?"

"This one." Haathi jumped into the crowd of Imperials and started firing at the ceiling. Some of them thought to hit the ground, but most tried to scatter away from her, in the direction of their own troops. Maglenna followed Haathi's lead, and the two of them shouted and shot their way to the main loading exit. If anyone got in the way, they stunned him or her, and by the time the security troops had gotten a vantage point Haathi and Maglenna were outside in the main loading area, running.

When they came around to the front of the building, they saw troops of all kinds running everywhere. Nobody noticed the rumpled-looking major or the camouflage-faced sergeant. Everyone was shouting orders, or tramping by with their blasters out, or shouting obscenities at the people on the maximum-security side of the wall.

Haathi turned to face Maglenna. "Are you all right?" she asked. "I was getting worried."

"About what?"

"If the troops thought they could just get one shot off, they would have picked you. When the enemy has to be selective, best to look unimportant."

"Is that rule forty-eight?"

"It's actually sixty-something. I just skipped ahead."

Suddenly Haathi and Maglenna were cut off by a repulsor car with a massive deck gun.

"Hey, Major Headcase and Corporal Punishment," its driver shouted. "Get in!"

"Sergeant, Morgan, I'm a sergeant!" Haathi shouted back, and gleefully jumped onto the back deck of the repulsor. Maglenna, who was standing closer to the front end of the vehicle, noticed that the driver was sporting a black eye and her passenger was clutching his shoulder. Both of them looked like they had emerged from a mattress fire.

"Are you all right?" Maglenna asked.

On hearing her say that, Haathi, standing directly behind Morgan and Jayme's seats, leaned forward and put an arm around each of them. "What happened?" she cried, taking in their faces. "I leave you alone for half an hour?"

"That's the thing, T'Charek. We weren't alone," Morgan said.

"Who were you with? A pyromaniac?"

"It looks like mostly soot and smoke damage, T'Charek," Maglenna said, climbing onto the back deck. To Jayme and Morgan, she said,

"I'm going to spend the rest of my career patching the two of you up, aren't I."

"Is that one of T'Charek's rules?" Morgan asked.

"It is now," Haathi said, and gave a sigh. "All right, just get us out of here, girl-genius. You can tell me how you torched yourselves later."

Morgan and Jayme each gave a stiff Imperial salute. Haathi sat in the deck gunner's chair and fastened herself in; Maglenna stood in the middle of the deck with her arms behind her, looking solemn. She thought that maybe if somebody looked at least halfway official, the guard at the gate wouldn't feel compelled to ask any questions. Not that that mattered—Maglenna guessed that Haathi's next plan was to have Morgan barrel straight on through the minimum-security gate and be far into the woods before anybody had time to respond. As it was, Morgan drove down side streets and gave the right-of-way to oncoming emergency vehicles headed for the wall.

Haathi, situated with her knee right next to Maglenna's head, sat back in her seat, and tapped Maglenna on the shoulder.

"First mission's pretty well over," she said. "How do you feel?"

"Numb," Maglenna said.

"Do you miss your desk job?"

"No, because I learned something today."

"Forty-eight extraneous rules?"

"Forty-nine. Anything you do in a war can get you killed."

"Including doing something boring."

Maglenna looked back; at the T-shaped admin building, the Imperials were still tripping over each other, cramming up the doorway, stumbling into the loading area, hollering and moaning.

"Especially doing something boring," she said. "Fortunately, with you three, that's one less thing for me to worry about."

Airon Imperial Supply Lines Crippled by Alliance Strikes

IZIZ, ONDERON: Alliance forces hit the Imperial Army-Navy Ordnance Center on Onderon early this week in a surprise attack which has all but crippled Imperial abilities to resupply its forces in Airon sector for the foreseeable future, according to Alliance analysts.

Thanks to the heroic efforts of the Onderon underground, the Imperial sensor nets surrounding the system dropped for 12 minutes early on Kagstag, long enough for a Rebel strikeforce to slip into the system undetected. Twenty minutes later, the planetary shields surrounding the Iziz region on Onderon itself also dropped, again the work of the Onderon Resistance. Within minutes, the starfighters of Shandor Squadron struck Jyrenne Base near Iziz, the site of the main ordnance center in the sector.

Imperial defense forces scrambled during the second attack pass, preventing a total destruction of the depots, but Alliance intelligence experts estimate a 67 percent loss of total ordnance overall, an overwhelming success. Shandor Squadron and supporting vessels pulled out of the system within an hour of insertion, suffering only minimal losses.

The Onderon attack is the first major military operation initiated by Alliance High Command this year. Sources in the command chain intimate that the Alliance has finally acquired the resources to make direct military confrontation possible under certain circumstances. Holonet Free Republic will continue to cover upcoming strikes against the tyranny of the Empire as they occur.

Holonet Free Republic would like to take this opportunity to remember the men and women of Onderon who gave their lives for the cause of independence and freedom. Thanks to their sacrifice, the Empire has suffered a serious blow to its military infrastructure in a major industrial sector. The Republic will rise again!

Imperial Crackdowns Make Kessel Run Even Riskier

CORUSCANT NODE: Word has come back from our sources on Kessel that the Empire has begun another crackdown on squatter mines and smugglers who make their living producing and transporting illegal shipments of glitterstim out of the Kessel system. Over 50 squatter mines were raided and shut down last week by the Kessel Mining Authority. At the same time, smugglers who had established regular Kessel runs over the past year were intercepted as they made their pickups, and arrested. Overall, some 30 smugglers (none of them CYN regulars, thankfully) were arrested and either executed or sent down into the spice mines.

With the illegal glitterstim pipeline all but shut down for the time being, glitterstim prices are already going through the roof. Enterprising smugglers who think they have what it takes to run the Imperial blockade can make a killing if they move now, and several are already reportedly establishing contacts on Kessel to do just that.

Cynabar advises against entering Kessel space at all at this time, however. The crackdown has all the hallmarks of an inside job, and we believe that there is an Imperial informer somewhere within the glitterstim pipeline. Until this person is found and removed, we will consider the pipeline compromised.

Avoid Kessel for now.

Rawmat Shortages Lead to Red Ships — Commanders Outraged

IMPERIAL TRANSFER POST, KUAT SHIPYARDS: When a 100 aging *Victory*-class Star Destroyers entered the spacedocks of Kuat Drive Yards two years ago for extensive system upgrades and refitting, they were, as reported in our 35:4:13 report, scheduled to roll out of the docks by late last year. Unfortunately, the rawmat shortage hit the Imperial Navy, and the hull plates designated for these ships were reallocated to more modern Imperial Star Destroyers being serviced nearby.

For nearly five months, the *Victory* Star Destroyers have languished in their docks, new engines, weapon systems, boosted shielding, and TIE hangars ready for action, lacking one important component — primary hull plates. In an extraordinary display of resourcefulness, Admiral Kendel of the Kuat Yards has produced an alternate source of hull plating — havod metal alloy. The reddish alloy, which fits all military specs but is deemed too difficult to process for standard operations, was processed by special order of the Admiral, and is now being welded to the frames of all 100 Star Destroyers. “We expect the ships to be ready for space trials by the end of the year,” a spokeswoman for Admiral Kendel said in an interview with Imperial Defense Daily.

Word of the renewed construction is fast spreading through the ranks, and the officers and men who will be serving aboard these ships are not pleased. Admiral Kendel’s office has reportedly been inundated by transfer requests from men who weeks ago were eager to serve aboard a refurbished Star Destroyer. “I used to be real charged up to be serving on one of the Essdee Vics,” said a gunnery chief assigned to one of the refurbished ships. “But I sure as tundin’ didn’t sign up to kick Rebel butt in a *pink* ship!”

Harold Crimmler of the Historical Battleship Preservation Association is appalled at the change. “Doonium has been the metal alloy of choice for nearly 10 centuries in capital starship construction. The distinctive white-gray cast of the battlecraft constructed with doonium has become synonymous with serious naval power. It would be a shame to see the classical appearance of the *Victory*-class destroyer marred by red hull plating.”

Fortunately for traditionalists, thousands of red Star Destroyers are not in the future for the Imperial Navy.

“We have no plans to employ havod alloy in future projects,” said Admiral Kendel’s spokeswoman. “This was simply an interim measure to clear the docks for new projects. By next quarter, we expect to have regular doonium shipments coming in from new Outer Rim sources.” This is, of course, of little consolation to those who must serve on these particular ships.

37:4:21/IHV/G492/COR.1.IPL/GEN

Mysterious Illness Destroys Colony

Imperial City, Coruscant

The Imperial Colonization Board regrets to announce that the Kammia colony, Drynn system, has succumbed to a mysterious virus. At this time, there are no reports of survivors.

The Kammia colony was dedicated to agricultural foodstuffs due to the planet's excellent soil. It is believed that the introduction of non-indigenous plants is responsible for the evolution of the so-called "mystery virus" which wiped out the colony. Components in the soil interacted with the Chandrilan grain introduced by the colonists, producing an virile, contagious and fatal disease which quickly swept the colony.

The ICB extends its condolences to the families of the Kammia colonists. His Majesty, Emperor Palpatine, has promised that the Imperial Survey Corps' soil-screening protocols will be refined. Hopefully, such a tragedy will never occur again.

— Imperial HoloVision

37:4:28/HUT/NAR.4.SHD/TRD/
S.Moshuddaa

Spaaga Makes Stealthy Move Into Corusca Stone Market

NARSHADDAA NODE: Spaaga Core, Inc. quietly moved this week to secure mining rights to an unspecified gas giant in the Minos Cluster. Publicly, the acquisition of the mysterious system was announced without fanfare as a move by Spaaga into the Tibanna gas industry. However, an inside source has told *Kal'tamok* that Spaaga has discovered another extremely rare gas giant which produces corusca stones in its turbulent atmospheric storms.

The discovery of a new world generating corusca stones is a major find, since only one in four million gas giants do so. Companies discovering such worlds seldom reveal their locations, since pirate mining concerns quickly move in to poach their valuable commodities.

That Spaaga — known primarily for the production of industrial gems used in laser technology — is entering the corusca market is major news, since it will be the first company to mine corusca stones outside the consortium headed by the Damarind Corporation. How this will affect the current pricing and distribution of the gems has yet to be seen.

Government Forces Eradicate Rebel Training Base

ISD *MOTIVATOR*, MALDRA SYSTEM: Imperial forces lead by Captain Briera of the Star Destroyer *Motivator* moved into orbit around Maldra IV yesterday to investigate reports of a pirate base. What they found was a Rebel training base and munitions plant, complete with a sizable attack force of starfighters. The Rebels, who gave the appearing ships no time to identify themselves, indiscriminately attacked all of them at once.

Captain Briera attempted several times to contact a commanding officer at the Rebel base to give him a chance to peacefully surrender, but received no replies. After bearing the brunt of the Rebel attack for a quarter of an hour, he ordered the ground base bombed and the starfighters shot from the sky. The ground base, protected by regional shielding, held out for five hours before Imperial Army special operative forces could disable the shield generators. The Rebels, rather than be taken alive, retreated to the munitions plant and detonated all of its ordnance at once, destroying themselves and taking out several squads of brave Imperial stormtroopers.

Hyperspace lanes to the little-known and unexplored planet of Maldra IV do not appear on commercial navigational charts, which is probably what made it attractive to the Rebel enclave which set up camp there. Imperial intelligence observers assigned to the *Motivator* estimate that the military force concentrated on Maldra IV had enough firepower to threaten legal and sanctioned shipping in the entire Shadola region of the Outer Rim.

Alliance Refugee Camp Razed by Stormtroopers

UNSPECIFIED NODE: Until this week, the greatest defensive weapon the Alliance safeworld of Maldra IV had was secrecy. This protection was snatched from the thousands of noncombatant personnel living in the colony — the husbands, wives, mothers, fathers, and children of Alliance freedom fighters — earlier this week when Imperial forces appeared in the skies of Maldra IV and rained death down on the defenseless.

The attack came late in the evening for the colonists. Imperial forces, led by Captain “Butcher of Baumm” Briera, rained death and destruction down on thousands of families and children refugees who had fled the tyranny of the Empire and found shelter on Maldra IV. The colony was protected only by a token force of starfighters and two ion cannons, as well as a modest planetary shield capable of only resisting direct orbital attacks. Against the might of the Empire, the colonists stood no chance of escaping the conflagration, and alas, did not.

The only testament they have passed on to the rest of us is a holorecord of the foul deeds perpetrated by the Imperials on Maldra IV, which came to us via a messenger droid. An edited version of this holo transmission is being made available to Alliance cell leaders for local viewing, to counter the propaganda claims regarding Maldra IV made by the Imperial lapdog media. If the sacrifice made by the men, women, and little children of Maldra IV is to mean anything, we must all do what we can to reveal the Imperials as the lying gunctas that they are.

Prehistoric Sullustan Cave Art Prophesied Rise of Emperor!

SHUBNUUB, SULLUST: Here in the underworld of Sullust, your intrepid investigator Andor Javin has run down another amazing find which may well change the way you look at the universe! Deep in the long-abandoned caverns of prehistoric Sullust, far above the bustling caves employed by modern-day Sullustans, lies a mystery of amazing proportions.

Archaeologists recently discovered a crude chalk painting on the gritty walls of a prehistoric dwelling which predicts the rise of the Empire, and the coming of the Emperor! I was the first human to view these amazing drawings, and can now confirm that a true prophet once lived in this crude cave.

Yes, there in the crude chalk images painted on the wall by a tribal shaman over 8,000 years ago, we can make out blurry images of soldiers in white armor going among the people and driving out Triakk, the ancient Sullustan god of chaos. Figures in red bow in supplication before a tall figure in dark robes, who is holding forth a jeweled orb in one gnarled hand. The orb is shedding light on the masses, providing illumination and showing the path to enlightenment. From the edges of the pool of light twisted figures, the twisted servants of Triakk, peer anxiously at the figure in black. The imagery is unmistakable!

The archaeologists, all Sullustans, state that they have not seen any of these elements in previous cave art, except for Triakk. This reinforces the notion that the artist was inspired by a vision of some sort rather than the traditional stories passed from one generation to the next.

Another amazing find, brought to light by Andor Javin in another TRI exclusive! Those interested in viewing the cave drawings and drawing their own conclusions may purchase Image Series AA-103-AJ-45 in care of TRI. Be the first in your population center to see the greatest archaeological find this century!

New Mines Opening Means Big Business for Spacers

RAPORA MINING CENTER, LITTLE CAPELLA: The Mid-Rim and Core have been experiencing a crippling rawmat shortage for nearly a year now, as Outer Rim shipments dry up or are given military priority. Since prices for manufactured goods have gone through the roof in the Core and Mid-Rim as a result, there has been a huge scramble by investors and mining concerns alike to open new mines to meet the new demand. *Rally's Daily Investor* estimates that over the next quarter, 9,000 new system-wide mine facilities will enter full production.

The first of these mines are now coming on line, and new crews of miners and support staffs are shipping out to remote locations all over the Outer Rim. These isolated communities will soon be desperate for entertainment to get their minds off the monotony of their backbreaking jobs.

Spacers who are there to sell them their dreams will come away with a hefty profit. Most of these mining concerns have not yet even begun to think of established company stores, which means that the independent spacer will not be restricted from selling goods directly to the miners. There is always the chance, too, that previously established shippers will be in a better position to win a coveted exclusive import contract when the company store inevitably does open.

Spacers interested in market research break-downs of goods and services which sell well in mining communities can purchase ITI's fact sheet 12-LX-33224 through normal net channels. Some items known to be in high demand are entertainment holos of all sorts, small-scale battle droids (one meter or smaller, unarmed), pets on the ImpDoc Export Unrestricted list, and of course, intoxicating substances of all sorts. The latter items require special permits, except for the item most in demand, and yielding the greatest profits — spice, which is of course, very illegal.

Infamous Pirate Gang Fades from Sight in Outer Rim

QUEO CITY, STEND VI: Sector law enforcement agencies have noted a sudden decrease in attacks by the small but deadly Khuiumin Survivors band which haunts the lesser-traveled hyperlanes in the Outer Rim Territories. Several theories have been put forth to explain their abrupt disappearance.

According to Kail Reimo of the Bazzel Crimewatch Association, they've simply retired for a few months. "They're probably holed up on some mudball of a planet, upgrading their ships and waiting for the local systems to relax their guard," he said. Reimo notes that the band has had some impressive successes lately, and if they are flush with credits, might be inclined to keep a low profile for a while. The other theory offered by Reimo is that the Khuiumin Survivors have simply split their booty and disbanded.

Grady Mannd, Defense Minister of Stend VI, is not convinced. "They've gone somewhere else," he said. "Why? Beats me. But if they had packed it in and split up, some of them would have washed up here. The split-offs always do." Despite the best efforts of Mannd's forces, Stend VI remains a favorite neutral meeting place for some pirate groups.

The once-mighty Eyttyrmin Batiiv pirate armada was reduced from 8,000 to less than 275 members in one crushing Imperial attack just a year ago. The remaining pirates banded together as the Khuiumin Survivors, and have slowly been rebuilding their forces, which has greatly worried local law enforcement agencies.

JAN Strike Leaves 4,000 Trapped Underwater

DRAEO-KAX, ALBRAE-DON: Rescue workers have been working around the clock to reach some 4,000 passengers and workers who were trapped in a monorail traveling through the Pica Rim Pipeline after a series of bombs ruptured a 4,000 kilometer section of the undersea transit tube. The Justice Action Network has claimed responsibility for the bombing, and claims that the strike is in retaliation for the recent Imperial execution of JAN founder and leader Earnst Kamiel.

The undersea tunnel has ruptured and flooded, surrounding the monorail train with tons of water. Transit officials in contact with workers on the trapped train say that water seepage into the passenger cars is light at the moment, and that there is enough air on board for the people to survive for several days. They estimate the rescue effort will take place well before the situation grows more desperate. The manufacturer of the monorail train and system says that standard emergency measures and procedures worked as designed, but that they are designed to respond to catastrophic system failures, not terrorists bombings on this scale.

Meanwhile, investigators are hard at work attempting to locate and apprehend those responsible. So far, law enforcement representatives have made no comments regarding the progress of the investigation.

CMG Expelled from CSA Space

CORONET, CORELLIA: The Corellian Merchants Guild, the Corellian spacer's home away from home, welcomed on a hundred hundred worlds, has been banned from the Corporate Sector. The terse announcement came today in a press release from Viceprex Tanna Odann of Territory Administration.

According to the press release, CMG offices throughout the CSA have two months to shut down and pull out of CSA space. All CSA work visas granted to registered CMG employees will expire at that time as well. CMG members are free to continue trading within the CSA, but will derive no significant benefits from their memberships.

The release gave no reason for the ban. The announcement took the shipping community totally by surprise, and CSN has not yet isolated the reason behind the move.

Slungerhounds Banned on Corulag

CURAMALLE, CORULAG: Due to an unusually high number of attacks against humans, slungerhounds have been banned on Corulag and the entire Corula system. The half-meter-tall beasts have become popular pets for those desiring a little extra security, but it seems that the furry mammals cannot always distinguish between friend and foe; studies show that 20 percent of victims of fatal slungerhound attacks are the owners themselves.

Micja Corneli of Friends of Slungerhounds, a support organization for owners, is incensed at the edict, which he claims was enacted with no prior notice by the Moff's office. "Slungerhounds are sweet, affectionate creatures," Corneli said. "For many of us, our pets are our only family. How would you feel if the government banned your family members?" When asked about the high record of brutal attacks, Corneli said that properly trained slungerhounds are perfectly safe. "The answer is to have a licensing procedure to ensure that every owner is properly caring for their animal, and not penalize those who keep safe pets because a few individuals can't handle the responsibility of looking after their animals."

The Moff's office had no comment.

Cynabar's Fantastic Techonology: Droids vignette

The starship battle raged as if it had a life force of its own. Many ships had been lost to both sides already and the Alliance and Imperial commanders alike knew that the Rebels didn't have an inexhaustible supply of fighters (the Imperial Star Destroyer *Vehemence* certainly appeared to have-as one Rebel crewer put it-all the guns in the universe behind it).

A lone Y-wing limped along the periphery of the battle, her pilot a veteran of many such engagements. "Flight Leader Wilkins, beginning my run," he intoned calmly. Keying his comlink for a quick message to his astromech, he called out, "Better hang on back there, buddy."

BXET-R2 (or "Box" as his master was fond of calling him), checked the restraining straps and clamps that held him in place behind the cockpit of the Y-wing. The R2-unit emitted a mournful beep and Wilkins chuckled as he read the translation on his computer system: "Try not to crash this time."

The Y-wing sped through the carnage, as Wilkins cautiously, carefully placed the aiming reticle of his missile launchers squarely on the *Vehemence*. The fighter sped forward, crossing the kilometers to the Star Destroyer rapidly, as the targeting computer sought for a lock on the *Vehemence's* bridge.

Just as the targeting computer signalled a positive lock, Wilkins triggered his firing controls while his backseat gunner blazed away at the Star Destroyer's shields with the Y-wing's ion cannons. A brilliant spray of light and fire illuminated the area, blinding the pilot.

Too late, Box howled a warning to the blinded pilot as a TIE bomber-damaged in the explosions-careened into the Y-wing's path, striking the forward shields and sending the pair of fighters spinning wildly out of control.

Box ran diagnostics on the ship and reported both blaster cannons on the nose of the Y-wing had been sheared completely off. The cockpit still had a breathable atmosphere but structural damage to the nose was considerable.

Box patched into the ship's internal sensors and found that Master Wilkins was still breathing and did indeed have a pulse. Still he failed to answer over the comm. The droid peered into the cockpit and saw that Wilkins and his ion gunner were slumped over in their seats.

Taking control of the drive system, Box corrected the Y-wing's wild spin, halting the craft smoothly. Checking the navigational sensors, the droid noticed the TIE bomber had also regained control and was limping towards the damaged Y-wing, positioning itself for the inevitable kill shot.

The droid began carefully modulating the gravity within the cockpit in an attempt to jostle the pilot awake. At the same time, Box plugged into the auxiliary control port with one of his many appendages and lurched the Y-wing forward and up into an arch that brought her out and away from the bomber's current vector.

The bomber-badly damaged itself-spied past without acquiring a target lock and was sluggishly repositioning for another shot. BXET-R2 tied into the Y-wing's fire control system and armed the proton torpedo launcher. Sending the ship into as steep a dive as possible he inverted the ship and triggered off a wild shot, sending the blue-white projectile hurtling at the Imperial fighter.

The Imperial pilot frantically avoided the missile, once again losing control of his damaged vehicle. A moment later, Box activated the Y-wing's hyperdrive and the stubby fighter leapt into hyperspace and away from the battle....

Cynabar/37:8:1:47/Hut• Welcome to version 4.7.1 of Cynabar's Droid Datalog. Like the previous incarnations, this scandoc contains data stripped from various newsnet boards and archives, including Galladinium's personnel manual and Imperial Defense Daily (which were not easy to slice, by the way).

Since so many smugglers transport—or use—droids, I figured this collection would help keep you informed of potential abnormalities, quirks, and dangers involved with these automatons as well as helping crafty smugglers locate potential sources of profit. Yes, droids are essentially mechanical constructs with computer brains, but their complex circuitry often creates difficulties not expected by their designers.

Bear in mind that the data I've cobbled together (at great risk, thank you very much) is as accurate as possible...but that doesn't necessarily mean it is the truth. Feel free to post any comments you have to help correct any unintentional errors that have crept into the Datalog.

Version 4.7.110

Cynabar/37:8:1:04/Hut• Welcome to the latest installment of Cynabar's Droid Datalog. I was frankly stunned at the interest generated by the last version (which hit the newsnets about a month ago). The Datalog was originally just a fun experiment for me; since so many smugglers own or traffic in droids, it seemed logical to distribute information concerning automata (information geared toward all you "freelance law-breakers" out there.

Where possible, I've screened the responses to the droid entries, and they are as accurate as far as I can determine. But, given how most smugglers operate, I'd take the information contained herein with a grain or two of salt. Remember the old smuggler's axiom: "If it looks too good to be true, it probably is."

SIDE TRIP

Part One

by Timothy Zahn

The hazy edge of the planet was just disappearing from beneath the Hopskip's control room viewport, and Ha-ber Trell was trying to nurse a little more power from the ship's as-always finicky engines, when his partner finally reappeared from her tour aft. "Took you long enough," Trell commented as she dropped into the copilot seat beside him. "Any trouble?"

"No more than usual," Maranne Darmic told him, digging a hand underneath the silvered clasp tying her dark blond hair back out of the way and scratching vigorously at her scalp. "The cargo straps managed to hold through that classic signature liftoff of yours. I'd say we didn't get rid of all the itch mites in the hold, though."

"Never mind the vermin," Trell growled. Next time they had a twenty-grade unbalanced cargo, he promised himself darkly, he'd make her do the liftoff. See how smoothly she managed it. "How about our passengers?"

Maranne sniffed. "I thought you didn't want to hear about vermin."

"Watch it, kiddo," Trell warned. "They're paying good money for us to smuggle these blasters out to Derra IV."

"And obviously don't trust us ten centimeters with them," Maranne countered. "They wouldn't be babysitting them like this if they did."

Trell shrugged. "Can't say I really blame them for being cautious."

Ever since that big defeat or whatever it was out in the Yavin system, the Empire's been spitting fire in ú fifteen directions at once. I've heard that some of the independents hauling Rebellion stuff decided it was safer to take the advance money, dump the cargo, and burn space for better havens."

"Yeah, well, I don't like hauling for desperate people," Maranne said, shifting the focal point of her scratching to a spot farther down the back of her neck. "They make me nervous."

"If they weren't desperate, they wouldn't be paying so well," Trell pointed out reasonably. "Don't worry, this'll be the last time we have to deal with them."

"I've heard that before," Maranne said, sniffing again.

The proximity-sensor alert began to warble, and she leaned forward to key for a readout. "Sure, this'll pay for the engine upgrades you want; but then you'll want sensor upgrades, and-" She broke off.

"What?" Trell demanded.

"Star Destroyer," she said grimly, activating the weapons section of her board and keying in the power boosters.

"Coming up fast behind us."

"Terrific," Trell growled, checking the nav computer.

If they could escape to lightspeed... but no, the ship was still too close to the planet. "What's their vector?"

"Straight toward us," Maranne told him. "I suppose it's too late to dump the cargo and try to look innocent."

"Freighter Hopskip, this is Captain Niriz of the Imperial Star Destroyer Admonitor," a gruff voice boomed from the speaker. "I'd like a word with you aboard my ship, if I may."

The last word was punctuated by a single gentle shiver running through the deck beneath them as a tractor beam locked on. "Yeah, I'd say it's definitely too late to dump the cargo," Trell sighed. "Let's hope they're just on a fishing expedition."

He keyed for transmission. "This is Haber Trell aboard the Hopskip," he said. "We'd be honored to speak with you, Captain."

"Well," Captain Niriz said, his voice echoing across the vast emptiness of the hangar deck as he eyed the four beings standing in front of him.

"Most interesting. Our records show the Hopskip as having two crew members, not four." His gaze paused on Riij Winward.

"Newly hired, are you?"

"Our previous ship had to leave Tramanos in something of a hurry," Riij told him, striving to keep his voice casual. The fake ID the Rebellion had provided him was a good one, but if the Imperials decided to dig past it they would undoubtedly come up with his recent connection with the Mos Eisley police on Tatooine. That wasn't a connection he was anxious for them to find. "We needed a ride to Shibric," he continued, "and since Captain Trell was going that way, he was kind enough to offer us passage."

"For a hefty fee, I imagine," Niriz said, his eyes shifting to the muscular Tunroth standing at Riij's right. "Rare to see a Tunroth in these parts. You're a certified Hunter, I presume?"

"Shturlan," Rathe Pairor rumbled, his voice almost sub-sonic.

"That's a twelfth-class Hunter," Riij translated, trying to draw Niriz's attention back to him. Palror's distinguished service with Churhee's Riflemen would raise even more eyebrows than Riij's own record if the Imperials found it.

"Excellent," Niriz said. "A Hunter's talents may prove useful on this mission."

At Riij's left, Trell cleared his throat. "Mission?" he asked carefully.

"Yes." Niriz gestured, and a lieutenant standing beside him stepped forward and offered Trell a datapad. "I want you to take a cargo to Corellia for me."

"Excuse me?" Trell asked carefully as he took the datapad. "You want me to-?"

"I need a civilian freighter for this job," Niriz said. His voice was gruff, but Riij could hear a distinct undertone of distaste. "I don't have one. You do. I also don't have time to locate someone else to do the job. You're here."

You're it."

Riij craned his neck to look over Trell's shoulder at the datapad, his earlier trepidation about their IDs and cargo giving way to cautious excitement. For a Star Destroyer captain to

ask for help of any sort-especially from a scruffy civilian freighter pilot-was practically unheard of.

It implied urgency and desperation; and anything that bothered a senior Imperial officer that much was definitely something a good Rebel agent ought to look into.

"What do you think?" he prompted.

Trell shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "It'll throw our schedule all to blazes and back."

Riij ran a series of highly vulgar words through his mind, making sure the frustration didn't show on his face. Trell, unfortunately, was not a Rebel agent, good or otherwise, and he clearly wanted nothing to do with any of this. "It wouldn't take all that long," he cajoled carefully.

"And all good citizens have a duty to help out."

"No," Trell said firmly, offering the datapad back to the lieutenant.

"I'm sorry, Captain, but we just don't have time. Our cargo's due on Shibric-" "Your cargo consists of six hundred cases of Pashkin sausages," Niriz interrupted coldly. "I presume you're aware that the governor has recently decreed that all foodstuff exports now require an Imperial license."

Trell's mouth dropped open a couple of millimeters.

"That's impossible," he said. "I mean, the inspectors didn't say anything about that."

"Just how recent was this decree?" Maranne asked suspiciously.

Niriz gave her a thin smile. "Approximately ten minutes ago."

Riij felt his stomach tighten. Urgency and desperation, indeed.

"off-hand, I'd say we've been set up," he murmured to Trell.

Niriz's eyes flicked to Riij, returned to Trell. "I am, however, prepared to waive that requirement this one time," he continued.

"Provided you're prepared in turn to deliver your sausages a little late."
"

"As opposed to not delivering them at all.>" Trell countered.

Niriz shrugged. "Something like that."

Trell looked at Maranne, who shrugged. "It's a two-day round trip to Corellia from here," she said. "Add in delivery time, and we're talking three days, tops. It'll be a scramble, but our schedule can probably absorb that."

"Not that we have much choice in the matter." Trell looked back at Niriz. "I guess we'd be delighted to help you out, Captain. What's the cargo, and when do we leave?"

"The cargo is two hundred small boxes," Niriz said.

"That's all you need to know about it. As for departure, you'll leave as soon as your sausages are offloaded and the new cargo put aboard."

At Rii's side, Pairor rumbled again, and Rii had to fight to keep his own face expressionless. If some bored Imperial took it into his head to poke around beneath the top three layers of sausages in each box...

"Don't worry, we'll keep them cool," Niriz promised.

"There won't be any spoilage."

"I'm sure they'll be safe," Trell said. "Where does this cargo of yours go?"

"Your guide will fill you in on those details," Niriz said, gesturing behind them. Rii turned to look-And felt the breath catch in his throat. Stepping around the stern of the Hopskip toward them, his stained Mandalorian armor glittering in the overhead light-Trell swore under his breath. "Boba Fett."

"It's not Fett," Niriz corrected. "Merely, shall we say, an admirer of his."

"A former admirer," the armored figure corrected, his voice dark and muffled. "The name is Jodo Kast. And I'm better than Fett."

"Not that that means much," Niriz said, his lip twisting.

"I've always found that a competent stormtrooper could handle any three bounty hunters without working up a sweat."

"Don't push it, Niriz," Kast warned. "Right now you need me more than I need this job."

"I need you less than you might think," Niriz retorted.

"Certainly less than you need an Imperial pardon for that mess you left on Borkyne-" "Gentlemen, please," Trell jumped in hastily. "I'm a businessman, with a schedule to keep. Whatever your differences, I'm sure you can lay them aside until this job is finished."

Niriz was still glowering, but he gave a reluctant nod.

"You're right, Merchant. Fine. You and your crew can rest in the ready room over there until the cargo's been transferred.

As for you're" He leveled a finger at Kast. "I'd like to see you in the bay control office. There are a few things I want to make sure you understand."

Kast nodded gravely. "Of course. Lead the way."

Niriz stepped into the bay control office, the armored figure striding in right behind him. The door slid closed; and at long last Niriz could let the unnatural stiffness drain out of his posture. "I'm afraid I'm not very good at this, sir," he apologized. "I hope I did all right."

"You did just fine, Captain," the other assured him, reaching up to twist his helmet free and pull it off. "Between this armor and your performance all four of them are completely convinced that I'm Jodo Kast."

"I hope so, sir," Niriz said, his stomach tight with concern as he gazed at those glowing red eyes. "Admiral..."

I have to say one last time that I don't think you should do this.

At least not personally."

"Your concern is noted," Grand Admiral Thrawn said, running a gauntleted hand through his blue-black hair.

"And appreciated, as well. But this is something I can't delegate to anyone else."

Niriz shook his head. "I wish I could say I understood."

"You will," Thrawn promised. "Assuming this plays out as anticipated, you'll have the entire story when I return."

Niriz smiled, thinking about all the campaigns he and the Grand Admiral had been through together out in the Unknown Regions. "When hasn't something you planned gone as anticipated?" he asked dryly.

Thrawn smiled faintly in return. "Any number of times, Captain," he said. "Fortunately, I've usually been able to improvise an alternate approach."

"That you have, sir." Niriz sighed. "I still wish you'd reconsider.

We could put one of my stormtroopers in the Mandalorian armor, and you could direct him by comlink from somewhere nearby."

Thrawn shook his head. "Too slow and awkward. Besides, Thyne's fortress will certainly have a full-spectrum surveillance set up.

They'd pick up any such transmission and either tap in or jam it."

Niriz took a deep breath. "Yes, sir."

Thrawn smiled again. "Don't worry, Captain, I'll be fine. Don't forget, there's an Imperial garrison nearby. If necessary, I can always call on them for help."

He slid the helmet back over his head and fastened it in place.

"I'd better go supervise the cargo transfer-we wouldn't want Merchant Trell's precious sausages to be damaged. I'll see you in a few days."

"Yes, sir," Niriz said. "Good luck, Admiral."

It was called Treasure Ship Row, and it was billed as the most exotic and eclectic trading bazaar anywhere in the Empire. Dozens of booths and shops of every size and description ran its length, with hundreds more nestled up against its edges, weaving in and out of Coronet City proper. Humans and aliens sat at open-air counters or stood beside doorways, hawking their wares to the thousands of beings jostling their way through the narrow streets.

A vibrant, exciting place; but for Trell, a bit intimidating as well.

The merchant part of him was intrigued by the range of merchandise available, as well as by the variety of potential customers an enterprising dealer could sell those goods to. But at the same time the part of him that had driven him into the isolation of space in the first place felt distinctly ill at ease in the middle of such crowds.

Maranne, walking beside him, didn't seem to feel any such discomfort.

Neither did the two Rebel agents, striding along behind him. As for Kast, in the lead, he doubted any of them could tell what he was feeling. Or cared, for that matter.

"Where exactly are we going?" Maranne asked, taking an extra long step to get in close behind Kast.

"This way," Kast said, veering through the crowd toward the side.

The others followed, and a moment later all five were standing in the narrow walkway between two shuttered booths. "Here?" Trell demanded.

"The booth you want is five ahead on the left," Kast told them.

"Curio shop-owner's named Sajsh. You-" he pointed a gloved finger at Trell "-will tell him you have a cargo for Borbor Crisk and ask for delivery instructions."

"What about the rest of us?" Rijj asked.

"You'll go out first," Kast said. "Stay out of the conversation, but watch and listen."

Trell looked out into the flow of the crowd, a shiver running down his neck. Something about this didn't feel right, but it was too late to back out now. "Maranne, make sure you're where you can cover me," he told her.

"There will be no shooting," Kast assured him.

"Glad to hear it," Maranne said. "You don't mind if I cover him anyway?"

Kast's invisible eyes seemed to bore into hers through the helmet visor. "As you wish," he said. "All of you: move."

Wordlessly, the others filed out into the crowd, Kast bringing up the rear. Trell gave them a count of fifty to find their positions, then followed.

The curio shop was easy to find: a small, somewhat dilapidated open-air booth with an enclosed back room that had been inexpertly added on long enough ago to look almost as moldering as the booth itself. A lizardine creature of an unfamiliar species was leaning on the counter, watching the crowds passing by. Taking a deep breath, Trell stepped over to him.

The lizard looked up as Trell approached, his alien expression unreadable. "Good day, good sir," he said in adequate Basic. "I am Sajsh, proprietor of this humble establishment. May I be of assistance?"

"I hope so," Trell said. "I have a cargo for someone named Borbor Crisk. I was told you could give me delivery instructions."

A three-forked tongue darted briefly from the scaled mouth. "You have been misinformed," he said. "I know no one by that name."

"Oh?" Trell said, taken aback. "Are you sure?"

The tongue flicked again. "Do you doubt my word?" the alien spat.

"Or merely my memory or intelligence?"

"No, no," Trell said hastily. "Not at all. I just... my source seemed so sure this was the place."

Sajsh opened his mouth wide. "Perhaps he was only slightly incorrect.

Perhaps he meant the shop to my kill-hand."

He pointed to his right, to an equally dilapidated booth that was currently closed up. "The proprietor will return at the seven-hour.

You can return then and ask him."

"I'll do that," Trell promised. "Thank you."

The lizard snapped his jaws together twice. Nodding, Trell turned and pushed his way back into the stream of pedestrians, face hot with embarrassment and annoyance.

"Well?" Maranne demanded, sidling up beside him.

"Kast had the wrong place," Trell growled, glancing around. But the bounty hunter was nowhere to be seen.

"Where are the others?"

"We're right here," Riiij said, coming up through the crowd behind him.

"Kast said to head back down the street and he'd meet us."

"Good," Trell said tartly. "I've got a few things to say to our esteemed bounty hunter. Let's go."

ajsh and the unknown man finished their conversation, and the latter moved away back into the mass of browsers and shoppers. Two booths over, Corran Horn set down the melon he'd been examining and eased into the flow behind him.

The stranger didn't seem to be trying to lose himself in the crowd.

Though any such effort would have been quickly negated by the company he linked up with: a hard-eyed, competent-looking woman, a young man about Corran's own age, and a yellow-skinned alien with several short horns protruding from his chin. For a moment

the four of them conversed; then, with the contact man leading the way, they continued on down the street.

At the edge of Corran's vision, a heavysset figure stepped to his side.

"Trouble?"

"I don't know, Dad," Corran said. "You see that foursome up there?"

Tooled brown jacket, blondish woman, white-spiked collar, yellow-skinned alien?"

"Yes," Hal Horn nodded. "The alien's a Tunroth, by the way.

Fairly rare outside their home system; most of the ones you run into these days work with high-stakes safaris, mercenaries, or bounty hunters."

"Interesting," Corran said. "Possibly significant, too.

Brown Jacket just waltzed up to Sajsh's booth and tried to make a delivery to Borbor Crisk."

"Did he, now," Hal said thoughtfully. "Have Crisk and Zekka Thyne patched up their differences while I wasn't looking?"

"If they did, I wasn't looking either," Corran told him.

"Either Brown Jacket and his pals are incredibly stupid, or else something very odd is going on."

"Either way, I doubt Thyne will simply pass on it," Hal said.

"Did Brown Jacket happen to mention where they could be contacted?"

"No, but Sajsh has that covered," Corran said. "He said they might want the owner of the booth next to his and suggested they come back about seven."

"Where they'll be asked to have a quiet conversation with a group of Black Sun heavies." Hal stretched his neck to peer over the crowd.

"Well, well-the plot thickens.

Look who our innocents have hooked up with."

Corran rose up on tiptoes. There was Brown Jacket and his friends; and with them - "I'll be shragged," he breathed. "Is that Boba Fett?"

"No, I don't think so," Hal said. "Possibly Jodo Kast, though I'd have to get a closer look at the armor to be sure."

"Well, whoever it is, we've definitely moved into the big time," Corran pointed out. "Mandalorian armor doesn't come cheap."

"When you can find it at all," the elder Horn agreed.

"This is getting odder by the minute. I take it you've had some thoughts already?"

"Only one, really," Corran said. The group was moving off again, and he and his father set off to follow. "Thyne wouldn't be stupid enough to kill them out of hand, certainly not until he knows who they are and what their connection is to Crisk. That probably means bringing them to the fortress."

"And you think you might be able to invite yourself along?"

"I know it's risky-" "'Risky' isn't exactly the word I had in mind," Hal interrupted. "Getting into the fortress is only the first step, you know. You think you'll be able to simply march up to Thyne, slap the restraints on him in the name of Corellian Security, and march him out?"

"We do have the legal authority to do that, you know," Corran reminded him.

"Which means nothing at all inside his stronghold," Hal countered.

"You have any idea how many CorSec agents have gone after top Black Sun lieutenants like Thyne and simply vanished?"

Corran grimaced. "I know," he said. "But that's not going to happen this time. And if getting into the fortress is only the first step, it still is the first step."

The elder Horn shook his head. "'Risky' still doesn't begin to cover it. For starters, we don't even know what game Brown Jacket and his Mandalorian friend are playing."

"Then it's time we found out," Corran said. "Let's stay close and see if we can find an opportunity to introduce ourselves."

They had gone perhaps two blocks-though where Kast was leading them Trell hadn't the faintest idea-when they heard the shout.

"What was that?" Riij demanded, looking around.

"There," Pairor rumbled, pointing his thick central finger to the left.

"Argument starting."

Trell craned his neck. There was an open-air tapcafe that direction, with a long serving bar at the rear and perhaps twenty small tables spread out in the open space in front of it beneath a wide, Karvrish-style woven-leaf canopy. A slightly built man wearing a proprietor's apron was standing in the middle of the dining area, a half dozen large and rough-looking men wearing mercenary shoulder patches looming in a threatening circle around him. The chairs from a nearby table were scattered back or lying on the ground, indicating a quick and unruly departure from them. "I think the argument's over," he said. "It's gone straight to trouble now."

"Come on," Riij said, angling that direction. "Let's check it out."

"Leave it alone," Kast ordered. "It's none of our business."

But Riij and Pairor were already heading off through the crowd.

"Blast," Trell growled. Stupid idealistic gornt-brained Rebels-"Come on, Maranne."

A line of onlookers had started to form at the edge of the tapcafe by the time he and Maranne broke through the stream of pedestrians.

Riij and Pairor were already to the mercenaries, who had opened their circle around the tapcafe proprietor in order to face this new distraction.

And now Trell could see something he hadn't been able to before.

Standing beside the proprietor, clinging tightly to his waist in terror, was a young girl. Probably his daughter; certainly no more than seven years old.

Trell hissed a curse between his teeth. It took a particularly vile form of low-life to threaten a child. But that didn't mean he was going to follow Riij's lead and charge in blindly like a mad Jedi Knight on Cracian thumper-back.

"Backup left," he murmured to Maranne. "I'll take right."

"Right," she murmured back. Dropping his hand casually onto the grip of

his blaster, Trell started drifting behind the ring of onlookers to the right. And with a suddenness that startled him, the fight started.

Not with blasters, which had been his main fear, but 'with hands and feet as the two closest mercenaries lashed out at Riiij and Pairor.

With three-to-one odds on their side, the mercs must have felt weapons to be unnecessary.

They got a shock. Riiij had clearly had some good training in unarmed combat, and Pairor was a lot faster than Trell would have guessed from the alien's bulk. Riiij's counterattack sent his opponent reeling back; Pairor's threw his merc slamming back with a horrendous crash into one of the other tables, sending it spinning and scattering its chairs across the floor.

Someone swore viciously. The downed merc scrambled to his feet and rejoined his comrades, their former casual semicircle now reformed into a deadly, no-nonsense combat line facing their attackers. The proprietor had taken advantage of the distraction to hustle his daughter back across to the bar; heaving her up and over to the relative safety behind it, he turned back to watch.

For a long moment the combatants stood motionless facing each other.

Trell kept drifting toward his chosen backup position, his eyes on the mercs, his hand tightening on his blaster. Would they draw now, in which case Riiij and Pairor were probably dead? Or would sheer pride dictate they beat such insolent opponents bloody with their bare hands?

The watching crowd was obviously wondering the same thing. Trell could feel their tension, their excitement, their bloodlust...

And then, out of the corner of his eye, he spotted movement to his left. The mercs caught it, too, anger-filled eyes shifting that direction. Their expressions changed, just slightly. Frowning, Trell risked a look of his own.

Jodo Kast had stepped forward out of the ring of onlookers.

For a moment the bounty hunter just stood there, gazing silently at the scene. Then, stepping to one of the tables at the edge of the tapcafe, he pulled out a chair and sat down. Crossing his legs casually beneath the table, he folded his arms across his chest and cocked his head slightly to one side. "Well?" he asked mildly.

And with that one word the decision was made. No mercenary with a speck's

worth of professional pride was going to use weapons against outnumbered opponents who hadn't themselves drawn. Not with a bounty hunter like Jodo Kast watching.

Roaring obscure and probably obscene battle cries, the mercs waded in.

At that first exchange Riiij and Palror had had the element of surprise.

This time they didn't. They did their best, certainly-and still better than Trell would have expected given the odds-but in the end they really had no chance. Less than ninety seconds after that battle roar, both Riiij and Pairor were on the floor, along with two of the mercs. The remaining four, not all of them looking all that steady on their feet, were grouped around them.

One of them looked around, jabbed a finger toward the proprietor cowering at the bar. "Them first," he snarled, breathing heavily.

"You next."

"No," Kast said.

The merc spun around to face him, almost losing his balance in the process as a damaged knee tried to buckle under him. "No what?" he demanded.

"I said no," Kast told him. His hands were in his lap now, concealed under the table, but his legs were still casually crossed.

"You've had your fun; but I need them alive."

"Yeah?" the mere snarled. "What, you got a bounty to collect on them?"

"You've had your fun," Kast repeated, but this time there was frosty metal glittering in his voice. "Leave it and go. Now."

"You think so, huh?" the mere spat. "And who do you think's gonna stop-?"

And abruptly, right in the middle of his sentence, he dropped his hand to his blaster and yanked it from its holster.

It was an old trick, and one that had probably given the mere the desired edge in many a facedown. Unfortunately for him, it was a trick Trell had seen used countless times before; and even before the other's hand had reached his blaster grip Trell was hauling out his own weapon.

At the other side of the ring of bystanders he spotted Maranne also

drawing-The mere had good reflexes, all right. In that split second he froze, his weapon not quite cleared of its holster; staring from beneath thick eyebrows at the four blasters suddenly pointed at him from the circle of people around the tapcafe.

Trell blinked as it suddenly registered. Four blasters?

Four. Two people down from Maranne, a bulky middle-aged man also had a blaster trained steadily on the mercs... and out of the corner of his eye, Trell could see the fourth blaster sticking out from his side of the crowd. Held with equal steadiness.

The merc spat. "So that's how you want to play it, huh?"

"We're not playing," Kast said icily. "As I said: leave it and go. If you don't-" Trell never saw the warning twitch he was watching for.

But Kast obviously did. Even as the merc started to haul his blaster the rest of the way free of its holster there was the brilliant flash of a blaster bolt from the direction of the bounty hunter's table, and a roar of rage from the merc as his holster and the blaster muzzle behind it shattered.

"-I promise you will regret it," Kast finished calmly.

"This is your final chance."

The merc looked like he was about two seconds short of a complete berserk rage. But even furious and with a burned gun hand, he was in control enough to know when the odds were stacked too high against him.

"I'll be watching for you, bounty hunter," he breathed, straightening up from his combat crouch. "We'll finish this some other time."

Kast bowed his head slightly. "Whenever you're tired of life, mercenary."

The merc gave a hand signal. The others helped their two casualties to their feet-one groggily starting to come to, the other still in need of basic portage-and the group straggled their way through the onlookers and out into the crowd.

Kast waited until they were out of sight. Then, pushing back his chair, he stood up, the blaster he'd used on the merc's weapon already secreted back in whatever hidden holster it had been drawn from. "The show's over," he announced, looking around at the bystanders. "Stay and buy a drink, or get moving."

The proprietor was already beside Riij and Pairor, helping the former to a sitting position, when Trell and Maranne reached them.

"You all right?" Maranne asked, offering Pairor a hand.

The Tunroth waved it away. "I am not hurt," he said, rolling to his feet and flexing an elbow experimentally. "I was merely temporarily disabled."

"You're lucky the condition wasn't permanent," Trell reminded him.

"You should have left it alone like Kast told you to."

"Yeah," Riij said, holding his stomach as he got to his feet with the proprietor's assistance. "Thanks, Kast."

Though I wouldn't have minded if you'd stepped in a little earlier.

Say, before they started pounding on us?"

"Six mercenaries wouldn't have backed down in front of three blasters," Kast told him. "I needed you to take some of them out first."

He half turned. "If I'd known it would be five blasters instead of three, I might have moved sooner."

Trell turned to look. The two men who'd drawn with them were standing there watching. "Thanks," he said.

"I wouldn't have counted on getting that kind of help in a place like this."

"No problem," the older man shrugged. "The Broomstaad Mercenaries have always had a tendency to consider themselves above the bounds of normal civilized behavior. And I've never liked it when children get threatened."

"Besides which," the younger man added, "we were starting to get thirsty anyway."

"Drinks?" the proprietor asked eagerly. "Of course; drinks for all of you. And meals, too, if you are hungry-the finest I have to offer."

"We'll take the long table in the back," Kast said. "And some privacy."

"Yes, good sir, immediately," the proprietor said. Giving them a quick

bow, he scurried off toward the table Kast had indicated.

"My name's Hal, by the way," the older man said.

"This is my partner Corran."

Trell exchanged nods with them. "Pleased to meet you.

I'm Trell; this is Maranne, Riiij, Pairor, andB" "Call me Kast," Kast cut him off. "Son or nephew?"

Hal blinked. "What?"

"Is Corran your son or nephew?" Kast amplified.

"There's a family resemblance about the eyes."

"People have mentioned that before," Corran spoke up. "Actually, it's just coincidence. As far as we know, we're not related."

Kast nodded once, slowly. "Ah."

"The table seems ready," Hal said, pointing in that direction.

"Shall we go sit down?"

"Oh, sure," Hal said, taking a sip from his second drink.

"Everyone around here has heard of Borbor Crisk. Fairly small-time criminal, though, as criminals go-strictly local to the Corellian system. Of course, if you're looking for impressive intersystem criminals, we've got some of those, tOO."

"We're not interested in impressiveness," Trell pointed out.

"Criminal or otherwise. We've got a cargo to deliver to this Crisk character, and then we're out of here."

"Yes, you mentioned that," Corran agreed, eyeing the other and trying to read him. It was hard to believe these people were really the simple errand boys they appeared, especially after the incident with the mercenaries. But if this was some kind of deeply clever plan, he was blamed if he could figure it out.

At least, not from the outside. It was about time he made his pitch to

get a little closer to the middle. "The thing is this," he went on, looking around the table.

"Two things, actually. Number one: considering who Crisk is, your cargo is probably illegal and certainly valuable.

That means that you not only have to worry about Corellian Security coming down on you, but also other criminals who might try to take it off your hands. And number two-" he hesitated, just slightly "the reason Hal and I came to Corellia in the first place was hoping to find jobs with Crisk's organization."

"You're kidding," Riiij said. "Doing what?"

"Anything, really," Hal said. "Our last job went really sour, and we need to recoup our losses."

"That's why we were following you, see," Corran said, trying for the proper balance of assertiveness and embar rassment. "I overheard Trell talking about Crisk, and thought-well-" "We thought maybe we could go with you when you went back to see him tonight," Hal took the plunge.

Trell and Maranne exchanged glances. "Well-" "We don't actually know we're seeing him tonight," Riiij pointed out. "That other booth owner may not know anything more about Crisk than Sajsh did."

"That's a good point," Trell agreed, throwing an odd look at Kast.

"This could be nothing but a blind alley."

"Well, in that case, you'll need help finding him," Hal said with a wonderfully genuine-sounding eagerness.

"Corran and I are locals-we have all sorts of contacts around the area. We can help you find him."

"One of you can go," Kast said.

Corran looked at the bounty hunter, blinking in mild surprise. It was the first time he'd spoken since they'd sat down at the table.

"Ah-good," he said. "Just one of us?"

"Just him," Kast said, nodding toward Hal. "Trell and the Tunroth will go with him. I'll be behind as rearguard."

"What about Riiij and me?" Maranne asked.

"You two and Corran will go back to the ship," Kast told her.

"You'll transfer the cargo onto the ship's land-speeder so it'll be ready for delivery."

Trell and Maranne eyed each other again, and Corran could see neither was particularly happy with the arrangement.

It was equally clear, though, that neither was all that eager to argue the point with the bounty hunter. "All right," Trell said with a grimace. "Fine. What happens if no one at that other booth knows where Crisk is either?"

"That won't be a problem," Kast said. "Trust me."

"Interesting person, Jodo Kast," Hal commented as the three of them headed back toward Sajsh's booth. "Have you worked with him long?"

"This is the first time," Trell told him, looking around uneasily.

There were far fewer shoppers at this hour than there had been earlier, and despite his innate dislike of crowds he found himself feeling unpleasantly exposed right now. "Actually, we're not working with him so much as we are working for him. Pairor, can you see where he's gotten to?"

"No, don't turn around," Hal said quickly. "We might be under observation, and we don't want to tip them off that we've got a rearguard."

Trell threw him a sideways look. There was something in his voice right then that emphatically did not belong in a down-luck drifter. A tone of authority, spoken by a person who was used to having his orders obeyed...

Pairor rumbled. "Trouble," he said.

Trell craned his neck. He could see Sajsh's booth ahead now, closed up for the night.

The booth beside it, the booth they were headed for, was also closed.

"Great," he growled, stopping. "Still no one there."

"No, don't stop," a soft voice came from behind him.

Trell felt his heart seize up. "What?"

"You heard the man," a different voice said, this one coming from behind Hal. "Keep walking."

With an effort, Trell got his feet moving again. "Are you with Borbor Crisk?"

There was a snort. "Hardly," the first voice said with obvious contempt. "Keep it casual, and don't try to be clever. We'd prefer to deliver you in fully working condition."

Trell swallowed hard. "Where are we going?"

"For now, behind Sajsh's booth," the other said. "After that..

. you'll see."

"I'm sure," Trell murmured, heart pounding in his ears. Still, there was one thing the kidnappers didn't know. Jodo Kast, one of the finest bounty hunters in the galaxy, was somewhere behind them. Any minute now he would jump out from wherever he was hiding, blasters blazing with micron accuracy, and flip the tables completely on them.

Any minute now, and they'd hear the roar of blasters. Any minute now

.

..

He was still waiting for that minute as the kidnappers herded the three of them aboard a speeder truck, sealed the doors, and drove off into the gathering dusk.

Part Two

by Michael A. Stackpole

Corran Horn's feeling that something was wrong got a big boost from his first glimpse of the Hopskip. The freighter looked as if someone had taken a stock Corel-lian Yr-1300, split the disk along a line running from bow to stern, flopped one half on top of the other, then patched it together with whatever scrap metal was conveniently at hand. Corran had seen uglier

ships, but none that were supposed to be operational.

He waited for Riiij to close the gateway to the hangar bay before he made a comment. "I guess smuggling doesn't pay what it once used to?"

Maranne's hard eyes flashed angrily. "We're traders, not smugglers."

Corran raised his hands. "Call it what you want. With Imp rules and regs out there, what starts as a trading trip could end up as a smuggling run."

Surprise played through Maranne's dark blue eyes, then she turned away and scratched at the back of her neck. "I'll get the landspeeder."

Her surprise at his comment made her statement come a bit too fast, and Corran thought perhaps he caught a hint of fear in her words.

Definitely more here than meets the eye. The second he saw the ship, Corran abandoned any suspicion that these people were hard-edged smugglers coming to deliver supplies to Borbor Crisk. The things Crisk needed to wage his little war with Zekka Thyne and Black Sun for supremacy in the Corellian underworld weren't the sorts of things that would be entrusted to the crew of the Hopskip. Actually, for Crisk to depose Thyne would require a Star Destroyer, which this ship isn't, and a legion of stormtroopers, which isn't hidden here.

Corran saw Maranne disappear through a hatch in the freighter, so he turned his attention to Riiij. "Shipping with her can't be too rough.

She's pretty easy on the eyes.

Known her long?"

The slender man shook his head, then ran a hand across his short, spiky white hair. "Just along for the ride.

If I do some work, I get some pay by the time we reach our destination." Riiij smiled carefully. "You been working with your partner long?"

"Off and on." Corran shrugged. Riiij's quick questioning of Corran about his background played to most people's tendency to want to talk about themselves. It's a technique you learn to exploit when fishing for information from suspects. Either Riiij has had training, is very private, or both. "Known him for a long time, but started running together recently. Bonded through bad times, you know?"

Like you and the Tunroth."

"You recognize him as a Tunroth?"

"Hal and me, we might be locals, but that doesn't mean we've not been around." Corran took a step back as Maranne lowered the rear loading ramp on the Hop-skip. "He got a life debt toward you or something?"

"Life debt is a Wookiee thing." Riiij frowned, then started up the ramp to the freighter's hold. "Rathe and I are just traveling on the same ship. No connection beyond that."

"Got it." Corran kept an easy smile on his face while cataloguing the information Riiij had just supplied him.

Corran knew life debts were a matter of Wookiee honor, but he only knew of them because of the Imperial warrants and advisories about Han Solo and the Wookiee working with him. Most folks don't know Wookiees exist or, at best, know Imps use them for slave labor. Folks who know more about Wookiees are usually Rebel sympathizers.

He followed Riiij up the ramp and started looking around for clues to what the Hopskip's crew was doing in Coronet City. As a member of the Corellian Security Force, Corran had access to most information about the Rebellion and its connections to Corellia. At least I have it when that worthless Imp Intelligence liaison officer isn't around.

While it was true that two of the Alliance's heroes were from Corellia, the Emperor's tightening of his grip on Corellia and the placement of forces on the world had kept the Rebel presence down. Corran knew there were Rebel cells in residence, and he'd gladly have run any of them in, but he didn't see them being so bold or so desperate as to try to hook up with Crisk.

Corran slid past the battered nose of the old land-speeder-like the ship, it looked as if it had been cobbled together from parts. It only had two seats, like a fancy speeder, but had a flat bed grafted on to the back. Except where dents let silvery metal show through, an even, dirt-brown coat of primer covered the vehicle. Not fast, not strong, but beats hauling this stuff on my back.

The bank of boxes that Maranne and Riiij were freeing from cargo-net tie-downs immediately attracted his attention.

They were uniform in size and non-descript, but that struck Corran as odd. All of them had exteriors formed out of green duraplast that was a couple

shades darker than his eyes, yet none of the rectangular boxes bore the streaking and scarring common on duraplast boxes.

None had holographic tags, scuff marks or other signs of use, yet all had been bound with duraplast cables and fixed with a holographic seal.

As he lifted the first one from the top of the pile he felt nothing shift inside the boxes, nor was there a need for him to locate the box's balance point. He shook his head.

"Where did you guys get sleight boxes?"

Maranne and Riiij both stopped as Corran set his box down on the landspeeder's bed. The woman frowned.

"What's a sleight box?"

"If you don't know what a sleight box is, maybe you aren't smugglers."

Corran tapped a finger on the top of his box. "It looks ordinary, but it has a low-power repul-sorlift coil matrix and power-supply built into the casing.

It neutralizes the weight of whatever is inside. These boxes could be full of thermal detonators or air, and we'd never know.

Smugglers developed them to trick customs officials, but most customs-droids know what to scan for now."

Maranne set her box down next to his. "Interesting story. Seems you've done more smuggling than we have."

"Maybe, or maybe I just know more about smuggling than you do."

Corran gave her a sly smile. "For example, I know no one smuggles a cargo that's made up of unknown items. What's in these things?"

The woman shook her head, her dark blond queue lashing her from shoulder to shoulder. "Don't know.

Don't want to know."

"I find that hard to believe." Corran frowned at her. "I don't know what kind of game you're running here, but these sleight boxes won't fool CorSec's droids. If this is stuff being hauled for the Rebels, they'll find it and

you'll be in serious trouble."

Rij slid his box onto the flat bed. "If we were Rebels and we knew what was in these boxes and it was meant for the Rebels, we'd be a lot more worried about the Empire than we would their puppets here on Corellia."

"You think CorSec's people are Imperial puppets?"

Corran flicked that suggestion away with a wave of his hand.

"CorSec's concerned with the integrity of the Corellian system, nothing more. If they tolerate Rebels here, the Imperial presence increases."

Who wants that?"

Rij's brown eyes flashed dangerously. "What you're telling me is that CorSec's people are willing to repress the enemies of a vicious regime so they don't get Vader's boot across their own necks. If I was a Rebel, I'd find it very difficult to tell the difference between CorSec agents and the Imps."

Corran forced himself to go over and pick up another box so he wouldn't immediately snap back at Rij. The smuggler's arguments had been heard often-and loudly-on Corellia. Corran, whose father and grandfather had both preceded him into CorSec, had long believed that CorSec could do the most good by keeping the Imps out of its solar system security problems. If Corellia could take care of itself and set itself up as a neutral party in this civil war, the citizens of Corellia would benefit.

While that position made perfect sense, and was defensible, it was also a position made at the top of a very slick slope. CorSec's directors had already forced the local divisions to accept Imperial Intelligence Liaison officers to monitor and coordinate operations with Imperial Garrisons.

Kirtan Loor, the liaison officer his division had been saddled with, had proved thoroughly arrogant and barely functional. He and Corran did not get along at all.

Corran hefted another box. "I think, from CorSec's view, they have a hard time telling the Rebels apart from honest criminals like me. I don't, but that's because I've got the right perspective. The Rebs aren't honest criminals at all."

Maranne smiled. "'Honest' criminals?"

"Yeah, honest. I know that what I'm doing violates the law, but I do it

because that's what I do. I take the risks, I make some money, or I get sent to Kessel. It's all very straightforward." Corran placed his box on top of the first one he'd set down. "The Rebels, they do everything I would do, but they say they are entitled to do it because the law is wrong and the Empire is wrong. They're really just making excuses for their actions so they can feel they're noble when they're really no better than I am."

"What an interesting perspective."

Corran spun at the sound of the faintly echoed voice.

Jodo Kast stood in the cargo hatchway, blocking most of the view of the docking bay. Corran ducked and dodged his head to try and see past the bounty hunter, but with no success. "Where's Hal?"

"I would expect, right now, he is very nearly at Zekka Thyne's fortress."

"What!" Rii's shout of surprise filled the cargo hold.

"You were there to protect them. What happened?"

Kast stepped into the cargo hold, then leaned rather casually against the bay's internal bulkhead. "Thyne's people were waiting for Trell and the other two. There were seven of them-including the Brommstaad Mercenaries.

I waited until they'd headed off east, then I returned here."

Corran slammed a fist down on top of a sleight box.

"East is where Thyne has his little palace."

Kast nodded. "Hence my assumption about their destination."

"And you did nothing to stop them?" Corran jabbed a finger in Kast's direction. "You're some hot bounty hunter in this Mandalorian armor who can shoot the blaster from a man's hand while sitting down, and you didn't stop them?"

"There were seven of them and only one of me. I already did the math for you on that match-up-I might have gotten them, but they would have killed your people."

Rii shook his head. "Rathe could have taken his share of them."

Maranne nodded. "Trell would have been good for at least one."

"And Hal could have popped a couple..."

"A couple wouldn't have done it."

"... Or more, if he'd been given a chance." Corran looked from Riiij and Maranne to the bounty hunter.

"Are all three of you so naive you don't know what's going to happen to our people? Thyne's going to ask them about their connection to Crisk and, if they know as little as you do, he's going to have to work real hard to get answers he trusts. I'm not too wild about him going at Hal like that."

Kast shrugged his shoulders. "You can always find yourself another partner."

"If you think I'm going to abandon Hal, I'm going to have to shuck you out of that armor and beat some sense into you."

Kast's head came up as he moved away from the wall, silently emphasizing just how much bigger than Corran he truly was. "Hardly the reaction I'd expect from two criminal associates. Out of proportion, really. You're acting as if there is a closer bond between you."

Corran gave Kast as cold a glare as he could. He did resemble his father a bit, around the eyes and through the face, but otherwise he was a compromise between his mother and father. She'd been tiny and had the bluest eyes Corran could ever remember having seen. His green eyes were a midpoint between her eyes and his father's hazel eyes, as his brown hair was a match between her blond and his father's once black hair. Even his height formed a bridge between that of his mother and father.

"It wouldn't matter if Hal was my clone-he's my partner, which means I'm responsible for him." Corran jabbed a thumb back against his breastbone. "I actually understand what that sort of responsibility means, Kast, and what it means is that I'm not going to leave Hal to Thyne's untender mercies."

Kast folded his arms across his armored chest. "You'd dare take on a Black Sun crime lord?"

Maranne paled. "Thyne is Black Sun?"

"Claw-picked by Prince Xizor, if the rumors are true."

Corran leaned on one of the green boxes. "He's crazy, cruel and wholly

nasty, but he does operate with a profit motive in mind. This cargo may have been for Crisk, but we could offer it to Thyne and ransom our people."

"I don't think so." Kast produced a datacard from a pouch on his belt and flipped it over to Maranne. "That card has the location and time for a new meeting with Crisk. Deliver the cargo there, then come back here and prepare to take off."

Maranne caught the card. "We're not going anywhere if Haber isn't here."

"I know." Kast gave her a quick nod. "It's my intention to head out to Thyne's fortress and secure the release of your friends."

Corran barked out a sharp laugh. "You balk at taking on seven guttersharks, but you'll free our friends from Thyne's fortress all by yourself?. Better check that math, Kast."

"The odds are substantial, but I anticipate success."

"Yeah, well, this is Corellia! and Corellians have no use for odds. I think I'd trust in your success if I was along to enhance it."

"I work alone."

"Ha!" Corran jerked his head toward Riiij and Maranne. "You work with them, you can work with me."

Corran shook his fists out. "Save us both some trouble and just say yes now."

Kast hesitated and silence stole over the cargo bay. The mercenary studied Corran and even though he could not see Kast's eyes, he could feel the man's hard stare raking him up and down. Corran forced himself to look at the helmet's black slit, inviting a challenge and ready to react to Kast's next move.

The bounty hunter's arms slowly unfolded. "I will go find us a landspeeder."

"Good." Corran realized, as he replied, that he'd been holding his breath. Hal's going to go crazy when he hears what I did. Facing down a bounty hunter like Kast. It had to be done, but it could have been done better. I'd never run away from a fight with a guy like that, but there's no virtue in picking one, either.

Darkness swallowed Kast's form, then Corran turned and looked at the other two. "You're in way over your heads, aren't you?"

Rij shrugged. "I'm not sure what's going on, but I don't like Rathe being captured by a Black Sun crime lord."

"Well, Borbor Crisk isn't much better. We're caught in the arena between two Cyborrean battledogs. Neither of these guys plays well with others, as you've seen."

Maranne brandished the datacard. "What are we going to do? We're supposed to meet with Crisk and give him this stuff."

"The first thing we do is find out what this stuff is."

Corran looked at the seals on the boxes already loaded on the landspeeder's bed. "Good, here's one that's junked. See if you can find another."

Rij started looking at new boxes while Corran fished in his pocket for a small hydrospanner. "This ought to do the trick."

Maranne came over and frowned. "What do you mean the box is junked?"

"Not the box, the seal-tab used to bind the duraplast strips."

Corran pointed to the round tab that connected the crisscrossing straps. "See how the hologram imbedded in it doesn't fully line up."

Look at it from the angle here. The corona on the suns here don't match up."

"I found another one," Rij announced.

"Good, bring it over." Corran hooked the edge of the spanner under the lip of the seal. "When they don't set up right you can pop them apart with a little shove and a twist." He lifted up, then twisted his wrist.

The seal popped apart, freeing the strips that secured the box.

"Get both parts and we can reseal this thing once we've peeked at what's inside."

Maranne bent to recover both halves of the seal while Corran attacked the other one. It came apart easily, then he reversed the spanner and used a

flat-bladed attachment to pry the box's lid up. "By the Emperor's black heart!"

Even before the lid came up fully Corran caught the sharp sour scent of spice. The box held seven single-kilogram bricks that had been wrapped up in heavy cello-plast.

They'd been dipped in a waxy coating to seal them, but the job had been done hastily. One of the packets had split open and spilled a low-grade spice compound inside the box.

"What is that?"

Corran looked at Maranne. "You're joking, right?"

"Like I said, I'm a trader, not a smuggler."

"This is spice. It's a really lousy grade of glitterstim-the real stuff is crystalline, long fine fibers, not a powder like this.

Dose up with this and you get really happy, at least really happy until you need more and the craving flows through your veins like plasma.

Not a pretty thing."

Rij curled a lip distastefully. "You know from experience?"

"Just hearsay, and watching a guy try to sell a lung to get more glit."

"Sell a lung?" Maranne shivered.

Corran shrugged. "Wasn't his. Belonged to some passerby.

Like I said, not good stuff."

Rij pried the lid off the second sleight box. "Sith-spawn!"

He reached a hand in and withdrew a crystal spike the thickness of his thumb and a good hand-span in length. Purple filled the stone's core, running from light at either end to dark in the middle. As Rij held the stone up the light it trapped filled it with orange, yellow and red lightning bolts. All three of them fell silent in response to the brilliant display.

Corran stared at the stone, then shook his head. "Is that a Durindfire gem?"

"I think so." Riiij's voice-box bounced up and down as he swallowed hard. "My father bought a ring with a Durindfire for my mother on their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Wasn't until the thirtieth that he had the debt paid off, and that was just a little stone."

"Not too many of those stones make it off Tatooine, and very seldom unworked like that finger there."

Maranne took it from Riiij and weighed it in her hands.

"This would be enough to buy us a new ship."

Riiij turned. "Let's find out what else is in these other boxes."

"No, stop." corran held his hands up. "We don't have time enough to check them out. Put the stone back, we'll reseal these two boxes and set them in the landspeeder's front seat."

Maranne reluctantly returned the stone to its box.

"What do you have in mind?"

"Look, we're going to need some insurance here if we're going to get off Corellia in one piece. We can reseal these boxes and no one will ever know they've been tampered with. You'll take those two boxes to Crisk and let him know you have, what, 108 more for him. He won't make a move against you until he has them."

Riiij frowned. "He can come here and take them from US."

"Yeah, but they won't be here. We load the rest onto the speeder and take them to a storage facility." Corran frowned as if thinking hard about something. "Okay, I have it. There's a Dewback Storage Warehouse on the main road back into the center of Coronet City. You can rent a storage shed there and dump the other boxes. You go to your meeting and let Crisk know you'll give him the location of the other boxes when you're certain your friends are safe. Kast and I will go off to see Thyne and if we're not back in due time, you use Crisk to try to effect a rescue."

Maranne slowly shook her head. "I don't like the sound of this."

"Look, we've got a veritable fortune in those boxes. If Crisk doesn't want to help you, set up a meeting with Thyne and ransom us."

"How do we get in touch with Thyne?"

Corran smiled. "You did that back at your first stop on Treasure Ship Row, remember?"

"Right."

"Okay, let's get loading." Corran resealcd the first box and then the second. "I know you don't like the way this is going, Maranne, but you're the one who said she's a trader. If things go badly, you're going to have to trade for our freedom and, speaking for myself, I hope you strike a super bargain in the process."

Colonel Maximillian Veers glanced down at the chair offered to him, but refrained from sitting. "Thank you for your kindness, Agent Loor, but I do not anticipate being here very long. You have looked at the message I had sent over to you."

The long, slender man sat forward in his chair, a motion that nearly tossed him sprawling up over the top of his desk. Loor caught himself with his hands, then brushed the lank of dark hair that had fallen over his face back into place. Veers felt certain the man wore his hair the way he did to accentuate his resemblance to the late Grand Moff Tarkin.

I served under Tarkin. Anyone who would think this Loor is at all similar to Tarkin should realize the similarity goes no deeper than the skin.

"Something wrong with the springs on your chair, Agent Loor?"

The liaison officer snarled. "I have saboteurs who de light in finding ways to annoy me, and adjusting the chair is their latest form of expression."

He reached over and hit a button on his desktop datapad. "And yes, Colonel Veers, I studied the message you sent over, as requested.

I can't comment on its accuracy beyond saying it is true that Zekka Thyne maintains a little fortress east of Coronet City."

"I already know that, Loor."

Loor's head came up. "You do? I wasn't aware that Thyne's headquarters would have been something you studied, Colonel Veers. I was unaware the Imperial Armed Forces had been given cause to consider Black Sun facilities potential targets."

Veers' nostrils flared. The only thing he hated more than having to deal with arrogant intelligence agents was turning a blind eye to the activities of the Black Sun. He assumed the Emperor's tolerance for the criminal cartel was based on reason, but Veers thought that tolerance was truly a detriment to the Empire. Allowing any outlaws undermined the rule of authority. If people could see Black Sun as somehow more malevolent than the Rebellion, then they could justify joining the Rebellion all that more easily.

"It is incumbent upon me, Agent Loor, to view any stronghold that is filled with armed individuals as a potential target. In this case I am told that Thyne is meeting with elements of the Rebel underground."

"Yes, but I am uncomfortable with your source. Who is it?"

"You saw the verification code. It is valid." Veers frowned heavily.

"There is no reason to distrust the information.

It is accurate and I plan to act on it."

"So you mean you don't know who your source is?"

"I don't need to know."

With a superior smile slithering over his face, Loor eased himself back in his chair. Veers hoped it would overbalance and spill him to the floor. "If you believe in this intelligence source, why come to me?"

Veers restrained himself from reaching out and slapping Loor. "I came to you, Agent Loor, because you are the Imperial Liaison Officer and you liaise with the Corel-ian Security Force in this administrative sector. I want to know if they have any operatives working in or around Thyne."

"Are you looking to use their extraction as a pretense for your attack, or were you worried I would lodge a protest over collateral damage?"

Veers narrowed his eyes. "There is no reason for good people to die."

Loor shrugged lazily. "If they do die, they die heroes. If you get me Zekka Thyne, you can be a hero, too."

"I believe, Agent Loor, I can find my own way to be a hero."

Veers spun on his heel and stalked from the office. With Imperials like you, Loor, I often wonder why the Rebellion has not yet succeeded in

overthrowing the Empire. If things are left in the hands of people like you, can the Empire possibly survive?"

Corran took one look at the SoroSuub X-34 Landspeeder Kast was piloting and sighed. "Buy or borrow?"

The bounty hunter looked up at him from behind the wheel. "Does it matter?"

"If I'm going to get arrested for traveling in a stolen landspeeder I'd kind of been hoping it would be something newer and sportier, like an XP-38."

"You can always walk, Corran."

"Good point." With his left hand on the windscreen, Corran hopped up and into the passenger seat. "Punch it."

Kast spun the landspeeder's wheel, fed power to the repulsorlift coils and eased the throttle forward. "How did the loading go?"

"Loading? It went fine." Corran shifted around in the cramped seat.

"They should be ready to make their rendezvous."

"Good.", Corran heard the correct emphasis and inflection given to the word, but somehow he thought Kast was being something less than genuine in his response. Corran tried to put his finger on it but couldn't, and that bothered him. In the past he'd had an almost sixth sense about hardcases like Kast, but he didn't seem to be able to read the armored mercenary. The fact that my father has been captured by a man who will fillet him is destroying my concentration.

Kast piloted the landspeeder in toward the center of town. The bright lights and raucous sounds of Coronet City and Treasure Ship Row all started to press in on Corran.

As a member of CorSec he saw Dirdock-CorSec slang for Treasure Ship Row-as a dangerous place.

While the fringes might not be that bad-and plenty of respectful folks dabbled in minor transgressions at some of the flashier places-there were locations there where even Darth Vader would fear to tread. Most of those establishments were controlled by Black Sun.

Corran's grandfather had lamented the changes in the criminal class since

the rise of the Empire. Rostek Horn had been in CorSec back in the days of Moff Fliry Vorru, back when flouting the law had been an art. In those days, Corran had been told, criminals only made war on criminals.

The abduction of Hal and Trell never would have been tolerated back then- civilians would have to get involved with criminal activities a lot more deeply before they were considered fair game.

Then Prince Xizor and his Black Sun organization had come to the fore.

Xizor had betrayed Vorru to the Emperor, in one step eliminating Vorru and gaining favor with the Emperor. Xizor had used Corellia as training ground for some of his lieutenants. The most recent and most brutal of them was Zekka Thyne.

Corran glanced out of the landspeeder as the Dewback storage facility flashed past. As he turned to look back in the direction they were traveling, he caught Kast watching him. "Something the matter?"

"You seemed to find something interesting out there."

"Yeah, I did." Think, Corran, think of something good. "It was the street art on the walls."

"Art? You think the defacement of buildings is art?"

Corran shrugged. "It's not the work of Venthan Chassu but it beats peeling Star Destroyer-white for holding my interest."

Kast studied Corran for a second or two. "How does someone like you know the work of Venthan Chassu?"

"I could lie to you and tell you that my mother used to take me to museums, but you'd see through that." Corran forced himself to stare straight forward as he abandoned the truth and started fashioning a lie from a wild tale a thief he'd once collared had started spinning for him. "I knew a guy who said he had a client who would buy anything in the fine arts from Corellia. He said he'd already lifted and sold a handful of paintings, some sculpture and a couple of holographic dioramas. The client seemed impressed, but wanted more. He was spending credits like they were made of free-floating hydrogen atoms, so this guy said he wanted to plan a heist to hit the Coronet City Museum of Fine Art. He wanted me in on the crew, so I cased the place."

Kast nodded slowly. "Who was the client?" "Don't know. My man talked to a broker, then he got tractored by CorSec and caught a shuttle to Akrit'tar. He

died there."

"So what did you think of Chassu's work?"

Corran frowned. Why would a bounty hunter care about art and care what I thought about art? "It was interesting. The Selonian nude studies were what I liked the best-but not because they were nudes.

Selonians have fur, so can they ever really be nude? And if it were nude Selonians I wanted," Corran held his hands up above the wind-screen, "I could find plenty of them here in Treasure Ship Row."

"Why did you like them?"

"Chassu caught the two essential elements of Seloni-ans: their sensual, sinewy forms and, because their faces were always obscured, their desire for privacy." Corran shrugged. "Some of his other work was fine."

"What did you think of Palpatine Triumphant?"

"The throne being built of bones gave me nightmares."

Corran shivered, knowing the nightmares had not come from the skulls and shattered bones, but the homicidally gleeful expression of joy on the Emperor's face. "As a final masterpiece it does the job, but I would have liked to see him return to Selonian studies."

"His loss was a pity." Kast's helmet turned toward him.

"There would appear to be more to you than meets the-" "Oh?"

"Indeed. The last time Chassu's Selonian nudes were on display at the Fine Arts museum was ten years ago."

Corran covered his surprise with a smile. "Not exactly.

New Year's Day, two years ago, they were displayed for a private reception for Museum patrons. Four hours, ten thousand credits per person." Corran tapped Kast on the shoulder of his armor. "You would have loved it, but you'd have had to get a new paint job on the armor first."

"And you were there."

"I was." So was Hal. My mother had volunteered with the museum for so long that when it came to hiring additional security for the reception, the

administration brought us on board. "I'll let you know when they throw another of those get-togethers, if you want."

"Please. I'll have to see if I can obtain an invitation to it."

Corran laughed. "If you can do that, perhaps you can get us an invitation to visit Zekka Thyne. How are you planning to get us in there?"

Kast's voice echoed from within his helmet. "I thought I would appeal to Thyne's sense of justice."

"You'd have an easier time finding the Katana fleet."

Corran shook his head. "Zekka Thyne is a human-alien mongrel with big blue blots all over his pink-white flesh.

His eyes are blood red except for black diamond pupils that are outlined in gold. He's got sharp ears, sharper teeth and the sharpest sense of retribution you've ever run into this side of a Wookiee bearing a grudge. I heard he shot a spice courier because the courier told Thyne she'd borrowed credits from a payoff, but had already repaid the momentary loan, with interest."

"What would Thyne have done had the woman not told him?"

"Killed her more slowly. He's a real artist with a vibroblade."

Corran frowned heavily. "What Patches lacks in brains he makes up for in feral viciousness. What would you charge to kill him?"

Kast's head came up just a centimeter or two. "Are you asking me to murder him?"

Corran hesitated for a second. "No, I guess I'm not. I was just wondering. I thought maybe if I did it I could consider the amount you'd get paid as some sort of charitable deduction on my taxes. If I paid any, that is."

"I would not be averse to seeing Thyne eliminated, but that is outside the purview of my immediate task." Kast looked over at him.

"I believe, however, I can get us in to see him. I think the diplomatic approach would be best."

"I agree. I prefer diplomacy." Corran tapped the blaster holstered

beneath his left armpit. "I'm also ready in case we have to be undiplomatic."

"which means?"

"which means I go low, you go high."

Kast nodded solemnly. "That shall be our backup plan, then."

The bounty hunter piloted the landspeeder with ease through the darkened hills outside Coronet City. Thyne's estate had once belonged to a shipping magnate who was arrested and sent to Kessel for smuggling spice. Thyne had obtained the deed at auction, after which rumors started through the Corellian underworld suggesting Thyne had provided the evidence that got the magnate convicted. Corran always suspected that bit of subterfuge had actually been planned and executed by Prince Xizor, since Thyne had not since shown himself to be that clever.

As they crested the last hill and came down into the broad valley in which the estate had been built, Corran pointed at the main building.

"It doesn't look like much, but those rolling hills serve as great revetments and channel an assault force in toward areas where he has mines in place. Up in the towers he's supposed to have E-webs capable of sweeping any soldiers off the grounds. Thyne is even supposed to have a bolthole ready to let him get safely away if trouble starts, which isn't likely. Double-thick walls, double-paned transparisteel windows, complete electronic sensing systems and forty to fifty blaster-boys make this a pretty tough nut to crack. I've heard CorSec has an open warrant to search the place, but without the Imp garrison to back them up, no one is stupid enough to try to deliver it."

"You weren't joking about the sensors." Kast directed the landspeeder toward two men coming out of a side entrance, catching them in the glow of the ridelamps, then turned the speeder to the left and let it settle to the ground. "I'll go speak with them. You be ready in case things go badly."

"You'll give me a sign?" Corran watched the bounty hunter unfold himself from the driver seat and mentally catalogued the weapons he could see. "Dumb question. If they fall I'll come running."

He watched Kast approach the two men. The bounty hunter held his hands open and out away from his sides, but not up in any sign that could be taken as surrender. He wants them to know he doesn't intend to kill them, but that he's capable of doing just that given sufficient provocation. The trio met and Corran could hear the buzz of voices, but could make out no words. One of Thyne's men spoke into a comlink, then Kast raised his left hand and beckoned

Corran forward with a casual flutter of fingers.

Corran left the landspeeder and approached the three men, aping Kast's open-handed posture while doing so.

One of Thyne's men came toward him, clearly intent on taking his blaster, but Corran frowned at him. What, you think I'm stupid enough to try to shoot my way in and out of here?

The blaster-boy hesitated, then sunk his hands into his pockets.

The other Black Sun hireling pointed at Corran. "Go ahead, take his blaster."

"You think he's stupid enough to try to shoot his way in and out of here?" The first gunman shook his head.

"Let's take them to the boss. We don't want to keep him waiting."

"True. Follow us."

Their guides conducted them to the main entrance and into a foyer that Corran thought might have once rivaled that of the Coronet City Museum of Fine Art for splendor. Rose granite and black marble had been inset into the floor in a complex and chaotic pattern. A stone staircase spiraled up to the second and third floors, and drew the eyes upward to the holographic representation of the night sky above them.

Small alcoves in the walls housed statuary and huge goldenrod wall panels provided ample space for the display of a vast array of paintings and original holographic works of art.

It's amazing how something that could have been so beautiful can so easily be made so... vulgar. It seemed as if Thyne's definition of art was intimately wrapped up with the concepts of nudity, excess and a color scheme that relied heavily on pinks, purples and an irritatingly vibrant shade of green. Some of the statuary-what little of it actually could have found a home in the Museum of Fine Arts-had been garishly corrected by application of this color scheme, with excess paint having spilled down the walls.

The paintings showed Corran a view of models he thought more appropriate for xenobiological textbooks and the holographs seemed the visual equivalent of a high-pitched scream.

"How much were you going to offer me to kill him?"

Kast whispered.

"Not enough."

They followed their guides through the foyer and a huge set of double doors into Thyne's office. Here the clash of artworks had a new element added to it: a war between style of furnishings. Thyne's desk had been carved from deep brown weliu tree wood and was in itself a work of art. Surrounding it were other pressed-form duraplast and fiberplast chairs and tables-the sort of things that could be left out in a glen because weather would not hurt them. A few stainless steel tables topped with transparisteel sheets completed the decor and a riot of lamps-no two matching-provided illumination for it all.

Corran looked over at Hal and caught a brave nod from him despite the twin lines of blood dripping down from his nose. Haber Trell looked in worse shape, with a rapidly swelling eye and an inert vibroblade stuck into the seat of his chair between his thighs. The Tunroth's yellow flesh had greyed up a bit, and a dollop of bluish blood trickled from one nostril, but Rathe otherwise looked alert.

Zekka Thyne smiled at Kast and Corran found the expression nothing short of obscene. "Ah, Jodo Kast, finally we meet. Normally I do not retain an individual I have not met, but your reputation precedes you.

I decided the credits were well spent." Thyne's scarlet gaze sharpened.

"Don't disappoint me."

"I have no intention of doing so." With a swift, smooth motion, Kast drew a blaster in his right hand and jammed the muzzle against Corran's left temple. "Haber Trell and the Tunroth are assassins who were hired by Borbor Crisk to eliminate you. Their partners are even now arranging for Crisk to fill a couple hundred sleight boxes with the price for your head."

"That's not true!" Haber Trell snarled angrily. "He's lying."

Thyne silenced him with a backhanded slap. "So who are these other two?"

Kast grunted what almost seemed to be a laugh. "They hired these two locals to help them get around and as camouflage. With these two in tow, who would think they are galaxy-class assassins?"

Corran started to raise a hand to massage his head, but Kast kept the gun pressed hard against his skull. Corran wasn't certain which hurt more: his

head or his pride at having been fooled by Kast. He played me very well, just like he played the rest of us. Better I was in my father's place because Kast never would have fooled him.

Corran glanced sidelong at Kast, then nodded toward Thyne. "You know, you really can't trust the word of a bounty hunter."

"True, but I am more willing to trust him than some assassin's local fetch-and-carry."

Kast reached over and relieved Corran of his blaster, then lowered his own gun. "My story is fairly easy to check out. You should dispatch some of your people to the Mynock's Haven. It is the cantina where Trell's partners are meeting within the hour with Crisk to finalize the payoff details. You'll find the sleight boxes at the Dewback storage yard near the spaceport. You can send other of your people there and wait for Crisk and his men to come and fill the boxes."

Corran rubbed at his temple. "You figured that out from my look at the place? You're good."

"That's why people retain me." Kast looked over at Thyne. "I take it you have detention cells here?"

"Wine cellar is empty. You can put them in alcoves down there."

"Good. I shall do that while you prepare the ambush for Crisk."

Kast motioned with his blaster for Corran to head toward the door.

"Once your people report back, you'll know who you can trust."

"Yes." Thyne hissed the word. "And those who are lying will pay the ultimate price for daring to deceive me."

Part Three

by Michael A. Stackpole

Propelled by a poke in the kidneys with a blaster carbine, Corran Horn stumbled into the makeshift cell.

He got control of himself fast enough to avoid bumping into his father

and turned back quickly, but Jodo Kast swung the wrought-iron gate shut. That effectively sealed the two Horns in a small, dusty grotto that had once been home to a fine collection of wines from throughout the Empire. At least that's the impression I get from all the broken bottle bits on the floor.

Corran skewered Kast with the nastiest stare he could muster.

"This isn't over between us Kast."

The bounty hunter regarded Corran placidly, but the trio of Zekka Thyne's henchmen forcing the other man and the Tunroth into a second grotto across the cellar laughed out loud. Their leader, the beefy; red-haired man who had given Corran the shove, sneered at the undercover Corellian Security Force officer. "You're strictly small time, pal. The boss isn't going to give you a crack at this guy. I'll be the one to take care of you."

"Oh?" Corran gave the man a fetal grin. "I didn't realize Thyne was into doing favors for the hired help. You're welcome to try me any time."

"He won't get the chance." Kast's voice came low and cold. "I've put up with your prattling and bragging and threats, Corran, and I am not of a mind to let someone else eliminate annoyances from my life."

The armored mercenary pointed a finger at the redheaded man.

"Touch him and I will consider it a matter of honor to turn you inside out."

The redhead paled. "Yes, sir."

Another of Thyne's Black Sun underlings closed the other gate and secured it. "They're in. Wanna threaten any of them, Nidder?"

The redhead frowned. "Suck vacuum, Somms. You think you're so funny, you can think up jokes while you stand guard on these clowns."

Somms' blond brows arched down toward his nose.

"They're in here secure, they don't need guarding."

Kast shook his head. "No, not in here, of course not, but outside the room, on the first stair landing. There you can hear commotion from in here or the main floor and be able to respond."

Nidder shoved his blaster carbine into Somms' hands.

"You heard him."

Corran smiled. "Just what I expected, Kast. You want someone stationed between you and me."

Kast grabbed the grate's iron bars and shook it once, hard. The metal rattled loudly and, startled, Corran involuntarily took a step back.

Nidder, Somms and the third Black Sunner started laughing, but their mirth didn't stop Corran from hearing Kast's reply to his remark.

"I've no fear of you, Corran. I look forward to you getting out of here because with Thyne sending his blaster-boys off to ambush Maranne and Riiij, I'm pretty much assured that I'm all that stands between you and your freedom. You may be good-you may even be better than I give you credit for being-but I'm still better."

Corran's left temple throbbed from where Kast had jammed his blaster pistol against it. "Keep thinking that, Kast, and don't be surprised when I prove you wrong."

"Come see me, Corran, when your boasts are not idle."

Kast turned and herded the rest of the men from the small room.

An old wooden door closed behind him and clicked shut.

Corran stared after him for a moment then spun on his heel and swore.

"Sithspawn! That son of a rancor played me for an idiot." He looked up at his father. "I'm sorry, Dad. I really made a mess of things."

The elder Horn's hazel eyes narrowed. "How do you plot our predicament being your fault?"

"I should have known there was something wrong."

Corran scrubbed his hands over his face. "Their ship, the Hopskip, is a piece of trash that Crisk wouldn't use to haul dead bodies, much less valuable merchandise. The others had no idea what was in their cargo hold and it turned out to be full of sleight boxes."

Hal frowned. "Sleight boxes are hardly state of the art for smugglers these days. It's almost as if they wanted to be caught."

"Right, exactly." Corran leaned against a fiberplast wine rack built into the grotto's wall. "Kast told Thyne the boxes are empty, but I found some with junked holo-seals and popped them. One box had spice-strictly joy-dust grade, but spice nonetheless-and the other had a fortune in uncut Durindfire gems. Even if we figure that one box of gems is it and the other 199 are spice, Crisk can use the gems to buy an army and use the spice to flood the market and kill Black Sun's profits."

Hal Horn turned a wooden wine-box over and sat. "So what you're telling me is that we have non-smugglers bringing in two hundred sleight boxes and they have no idea what's in them. You find gems and spice in two and the shipment is headed for Crisk. Crisk himself can't put together that sort of shipment, so he has a backer. Who?"

Corran frowned. "The gems come from Tatooine. Isn't there a Hutt out there working the spice trade?"

"Jappa or Jadda or something like that, yes. He's powerful there, but expanding into Corellia? That's too bold a move." Hal's mouth opened, then he shook his head.

He motioned his son aside and looked past Corran toward the other cell.

"Haber Trell, how long have you known Jodo Kast?"

The Hopskip's pilot stood and grasped the bars of his prison. "I don't know him. He's along for the ride."

"Yes." Hal leaned back against the wall and laughed lightly.

"That's it."

Corran shook his head. "You're saying Kast is behind the shipment going to Crisk? But that makes no sense since he's told Thyne's people where to find the boxes with the spice and gems."

"No, Corran, Kast isn't the mastermind, he's what's being smuggled into Corellia."

Corran's jaw shot open. "It doesn't make any sense."

"No?" Hal gave Corran an appraising glance-of the sort that in the past had warned Corran that his father thought he was being lazy in his thinking. "What do you make of Kast's last remark?"

Corran thought back. "He was taunting me."

"Agreed, but what did he tell us by taunting you?"

The sigh came up all the way from Corran's toes. "He told us that he was all that stood between us and freedom-that Thyne's guys are all gone. He told me to come find him when we got free." Corran slapped his forehead with the heel of his hand. "I should have seen that."

"You did."

"Yeah, but it took you to point it out to me." Corran shook his head and toed the neck of a broken bottle.

"There are times when my brain just doesn't work."

"No, Corran, your brain works fine." Hal kept his tone even, but pointed a finger at his son. "You just need to focus your thinking."

You're angry because of how Kast tricked you, and I think you were a bit afraid for how I was doing."

"Right on both counts."

"It's understandable, son, and appreciated in the case of your concern for me, but you can't let your emotions and incidental things deflect you."

"I know that, Dad. I really do." He smiled at his father.

"I try to follow your example, but you're better at it than I am."

"I have a few years on you, Corran."

"It's more than just the years, Dad." Corran winced. "I never would have read Kast's message right the way you did."

The elder Horn's eyes twinkled. "I have to admit to you, Corran, I cheated this time out."

"What?"

Hal pointed past him. "Up there, on the bars Kast shook, see what that little thing is, will you?"

Corran turned and looked closely at the bars. Where Kast had grasped one in his right hand, Corran saw a small black cylinder about a hand-span in length and about the diameter of a blaster-bolt. He freed it from the bar with a tug, leaving an adhesive residue on the wrought-iron, and felt a small button beneath his thumb, near the cylinder's tip.

"Be careful with that, Corran."

The younger man nodded and hit the button. All but invisible in the half-light, a delicate monomolecular blade slid from the cylinder.

"I know what it is, and I remember what happened to Lefty Dindo."

Corran cut carefully down with the blade and through the lock's bolt.

He retracted the stiletto's fragile blade and swung the door open.

"Freeing us from this cell is a bit easier than Lefty trying to use one of these to free himself from binders."

Hal Horn paused in the door cell's doorway. "You might want to cut us a couple of the bars to use as weapons."

Somms might not be the brightest of Black Sunners, but I think he's going to take some convincing before he lets us out of here."

"Agreed." Extending the blade again, Corran cut a pair of 50-centimeter-long bars from the bottom of the grate and handed one to his father.

Hal swung the club against his left hand with a meaty thwack.

"This will work. Now how do we lure Somms in?"

Corran squinted at the room's closed door. "You figure Somms as someone who will raise an alarm immediately, or will wait to report success?"

"After Nidder's giving him the duty? He'll act, then report."

"That's my read, too. The landing was ten steps up and we're far enough away from the office that if we make some noise, no one will notice, I think." Corran smiled.

"I'll do the hard work if you want to do the yelling."

"Yelling works for me." Hal Horn smiled. "Be careful."

"Right." Corran walked over to the wooden door and set the length of the blade to a half-centimeter shy of the door's depth, then cut very cautiously. He scored a circle in the center of it. Once he had the circle taken care of, he cut lines heading out from it as if a child drawing a sunburst. Lastly he carved little semicircles around the hinges and the lock.

He closed the blade and handed it to his father in exchange for one of the clubs. "Okay, here goes nothing."

"Wait!"

Corran looked over at Haber Trell. "What do you want?"

"Don't leave us in here. If you're busting out, we want to go, too."

"I don't think so, Trell." The flesh tightened around Corran's eyes.

"Even if you're twice the fighter that you are a smuggler, you'll still be in the way."

Hal nodded in agreement, but tossed them the molecular stiletto anyway.

"Corran's right, you won't want to come with us. We'll head out and deal with Thyne. Give us a couple of minutes, then go fast.

Steal one of Thyne's airspeeders and fly. Head back to your ship and get out of the system."

Trell nodded. "Thanks."

Corran frowned at his father, then pointed at Trell.

"And, listen, don't put that cargo back on your ship. You don't want to be shipping spice around."

Trell shivered and Corran took that to be an eloquent answer to his caution.

"Ready, Dad?"

"All set."

Corran smiled and ran backward at the door. He leaped up and hit it smack in the middle with his back.

The door exploded into fragments around him, spraying large chunks of wood into the narrow corridor outside the makeshift prison. Corran crashed down amid it all, yelping involuntarily instead of letting forth with a great oof as he had planned. No jagged edges, but the debris sure is tumpy.

Hal's voice flooded through the dying echoes of the door's crisp crack.

"Keep that Tunroth away from me!"

With his eyes nearly shut, Corran saw Somms come flying down the stairs to the landing. The man kept his back to the stone wall as he crept toward the cell, then he brandished the blaster carbine and prepared to rush into the cell. To do that he prepared to pivot on his right foot, fill the doorway, then go in.

As Somms' left foot came around in the pivot move, Corran caught it in his left hand. Letting Somms' momentum pull him up into a sitting position, Corran brought his metal truncheon down on the top of the man's pelvis. Somms started to cry out, more in surprise than pain it seemed, when Hal appeared in the doorway and clipped him with a fist in the head.

Somms collapsed to the floor and did not move.

Corran frowned at his father. "Why cut the club if you aren't going to use it?"

"Didn't need it." Hal snaked the blaster carbine from beneath Somms, flicked the selector lever over to stun, and pumped a blue bolt into him. The Black Sunher twitched once, then lay gently still. "I expect he'll still feel the blow you dealt him when he wakes up."

"We can but hope." Corran rolled him over and unfastened his blaster belt. Donning it himself, Corran pulled the blaster from it and checked the power pack. He glanced up at his father. "You going to leave that set on stun?"

"I haven't noticed that killshots fly any more true than stunbolts."

"True, but there's just so many more forms to fill out when we bring them back alive."

"Don't even joke about that, Corran." His father gave him a reproving glance that made Corran feel about as big as a hologame piece. "Set it on stun and you won't regret accidentally hitting a friend."

"Yes, sir." Corran flicked the pistol's selector lever to stun and stood up. He waved his father toward the door.

"Time to get Thyne. Age before beauty."

"Brains before impudence." Hal tossed a quick salute to Haber Trell and Rathe. "Luck to you, but keep your heads down and get out of here fast. If Thyne doesn't react well to our refusing his hospitality, you don't want to be in the blast radius."

Arl Nidder matched Jodo Kast's long-legged stride as best he could.

The bounty hunter impressed him, but the armor impressed him more. Now if I had a suit of that Mandalorian armor I'd be pretty tough. I'd be able to get a lot of light-years between me and the rest of the Bromstaad boys. Maybe I hire out to do wetwork for some Moff, or maybe even Prince Xizor.

His ruminations ended abruptly as they reentered Thyne's office.

Nidder liked the office because it seemed like a museum to him. He'd never been in a real museum, but he knew they were places where old and valued things were collected. He took it as a mark of pride that Thyne kept him close enough to protect the crime lord's prized possessions.

Surrounded by beauty though he was, Thyne did not look happy. The holoprojector plate built into his desk showed a view of Thyne's fortress and the surrounding valley in translucent green detail.

Moving around the area were small orange icons that Nidder had seen in security simulations, but only when they were running worst case scenarios to scare the wits out of new recruits.

Nidder's jaw dropped. "Are those really storm-troopers?"

Thyne nodded, then snapped a comlink on. "All personnel report to battle stations. This is not a drill. We have hostile deployment to the north and east. Move it, I want all defenses reported as operational in thirty seconds."

Nidder and Deif started toward the room's partially ajar doors, but Thyne stopped them with a snarl. "Not you two. Not that I don't trust you, Kast."

Kast raised his hands. "But you don't trust me. I'll remind you of this next time we negotiate a price for my services." The long, tall bounty hunter pulled a chair around where he could watch Thyne on the right and the doors at

the left, but did so in such a casual way that it took Nidder a moment or two to recognize exactly what he was doing.

Kast looked directly at Nidder, then calmly crossed his right leg over his left.

Nidder shifted uncomfortably and got the distinct impression that the only way he'd get a suit of that armor was to be lucky enough to be around when someone else killed Kast and peeled him out of it. Of course, the thought didn't form itself exactly that way in Nidder's brain. He just knew he didn't want that suit of armor, just one like it.

His momentary feeling of inferiority vanished as he realized Kast wasn't as smart as he thought himself to be. If the mercenary had turned his chair around he still could have watched the desk and doors, but also could see the painting of frolicking nudes on the wall. As it was, Nidder could fully appreciate it-though he was at a loss to explain why the artist had included gardening implements in the painting-and smiled to let Kast know what he was missing.

The hologram shifted to a schematic of the house, with the corridor outside the door rendered in yellow light that blinked on and off.

Thyne hissed furiously. "Someone is in the hall. The Imps have already infiltrated the building." He pointed Nidder and Deif toward the door: Kast started speaking in a loud voice. "Of course, handling things in a diplomatic manner works best." The bounty hunter pointed toward two spots along the wall where the Bromstaad mercenaries could cover the doorway with a murderous cross fire. "Then again, there are times when one has to be undiplomatic."

Nidder marveled at how Kast's voice covered the sound of his approach to the door. He stopped exactly where Kast wanted him to and drew his blaster pistol. He set it to kill and waited, but shot Kast a wink and a nod. When the nod was returned, Nidder even began to imagine that Kast might take him on as an apprentice, or even a partner. He's seen how good I am. He knows what he'll be getting when we work together.

The exploding of the lower half of one door interrupted Nidder's fantasy. Through the smoke and spray of fiery debris came the smallest of the prisoners they'd left below. Coming up into a crouch from the somersault that carried him through the hole, the brown-haired man raised a blaster pistol and triggered two shots. The first blue bolt missed, but the second caught Deif in the stomach, wreathing him in azure energy.

Nidder brought his pistol in line with the little man. He doesn't see me.

He doesn't know I'm here. His mistake. Nidder started to tighten his finger on the trigger when he felt himself moving backward.

He felt his shoulders hit the wall, then his head rebounded from it.

Through the exploding stars he saw a second bolt flash out from the blaster built into the thigh of the Mandalorian armor.

In the nanosecond it took for the scarlet bolt to sizzle through his chest, Nidder realized Kast had positioned him so carefully and precisely because the bounty hunter wanted to kill him. Nidder did not feel outrage at having been so easily betrayed and slaughtered, nor did he, in his dying moment, grant Kast a modicum of respect for having worked so coolly to slay him. No, for Arl Nidder, dying as he slid to the floor, there was only one final thought. Now if I had a set of that armor....

Corran saw the red bolts burn by on his left and swung around in that direction as his target flopped to the ground. At the back of the room, Corran saw Thyne running for where a wall panel slid back to reveal a black recess. He started to track the fleeing crime lord, but pulled his pistol back as Kast's head and shoulders eclipsed Thyne.

He's getting away.

Corran glanced back at the door. "All clear."

Hal stepped through, looked at Nidder's body, then at Kast.

"That's another round of drinks on me by way of thanks."

The bounty hunter uncrossed his legs and stood. "Pest control."

Corran pointed at the dark opening in the wall.

"Thyne went out through there."

Hal approached it cautiously. "Looks clear."

Corran appropriated the blaster carbine the man he'd shot had been carrying and set it for stun. "Let's go find him."

He turned to Kast. "Come along. We could use your help."

"There's a bounty on Thyne. We're going to get him, but the bounty can be yours." Corran looked around the room at the garish decorations and horrific

art. "It might even be sufficient to buy some real art and offset memories of this place."

"You tempt me very much." Kast shrugged. "However, someone with such inferior taste in art should not be hard to catch. I would join you, but I'm a simple bounty hunter and I still have a job to do."

Despite having no read on Kast, Corran knew he was lying. He raised an eyebrow. "I don't believe you're a simple bounty hunter."

"Nor do I believe you and your father are simple hoodlums looking for underworld employment." Kast crossed to the desk and punched a button on the holographic display unit's control panel. A view of the surrounding area came up and Corran saw small orange icons moving in swarms over the terrain. "These are Imperial storm-troopers."

They're likely to make things uncomfortable if you don't get going.

You don't want to be caught here."

"Neither do you."

"I won't be."

Corran nodded. "Another time, then."

"Perhaps." The finality in Kast's voice told Corran there never would be a next time, and somehow he didn't find that prospect cause for anything but relief.

Corran rejoined his father just inside the entrance to Thyne's escape passage. The narrow corridor had been melted through the native stone with a gentle slope downward.

Every fifteen meters or so it cut back on itself, forcing the Horns to advance carefully. The brevity of the passages meant any firefight would be at close quarters and extremely deadly.

Corran clutched his blaster carbine in both hands and snuggled it against his right flank. It had been modified slightly after its arrival from the factory by the inclusion of a pinpoint glow rod attached to the left side of the barrel, and more work had been done on it to make it what was known in street parlance as a hotshot. The trigger guard had been cut away, leaving the trigger free and the weapon liable to be fired when the trigger caught on clothing or was otherwise jarred. Using a hotshot was supposed to indicate how

tough a person was, but it only took one view of the results of an unsafed hotshot pistol being tucked into a waistband to convince most folks it was a foolhardy modification.

Of course, no one is going to tuck a carbine into his pants.

Corran smiled slightly, then nodded as his father signaled him to come forward. Remaining low, Corran came around the corner of the corridor, then dropped to the ground as a red blaster bolt sizzled through the air above him.

He shot back twice, but neither blue bolt hit anything but stone.

"Corridor widens out into a natural cave.

We're probably at the rear of the property."

"Okay, take it slow. Lose the light."

Corran flicked off the pinpoint glow rod and closed his eyes. He waited for a count of ten for his eyes to get adjusted to the darkness, then opened them. Bioluminescent lifeforms-lichen and the things that ate it-gave off a purplish glow that allowed Corran to make out shadowed shapes. Some were regular and appeared to be duraplast boxes of varying sizes, while the larger, more menacing ones were curiously hunched and gnarled stone formations. There seemed to be little physical modification of the cave; the floor remained uneven and boxes had been wedged in various places where space allowed. Corran assumed the previous owner had kept the cave in its natural state and Thyne had stored in it precious or vital cargoes that he did not trust to have any place else.

Corran crept forward, remaining low. He reached the first box and in the faint glow made out the stenciled Imperial legend proclaiming it to be full of blaster carbines.

He would have opened it, but the scent of spice lingered strongly enough in the immediate area that he knew what it really contained.

Either Thyne is just storing spice in this, or Black Sun has some backdoor Imperial connections that are allowing them to ship this stuff in past Customs.

I'll have to ask Loor about that.

Corran whistled short and sharp, then heard his father close the gap between them. For an older man, and one as big as he was, Hal moved pretty

quietly. I felt his presence before I picked up that slight scuff of his sole against the stone.

Oh, Thyne, you don't know who you're messing with.

A return whistle sent Corran forward. He moved slowly and carefully, wending his way from one dark rock to another. He did his best to avoid those that were glowing because he didn't want to silhouette himself against one.

He took great care to make as little noise as possible, and smiled as he hunkered down behind a large black rock.

Corran looked back toward his father and was set to whistle when he heard the scrape of metal on a rock. He glanced up and triggered one shot from the blaster carbine.

The azure bolt streaked past Thyne as he leaped down from a large dolmen, then Thyne's right heel caught Corran in the shoulder and spun him to the ground. His blaster carbine bounced away, firing off two random shots. He felt Thyne's left arm tighten around his neck and then he was hauled to his feet as the alien straightened up, his body shielding Thyne from fire.

The muzzle of a blaster pistol ground in under the right corner of Corran's jaw. A glow rod lit up, bathing the right side of Corran's face with light. The muscles on the arm around his neck bulged, constricting his breathing and killing any thoughts of struggling.

Thyne growled loudly, sending angry echoes of his voice throughout the cavern. "Your partner is dead if you don't show yourself in five seconds."

Those five seconds took an eternity to pass for Corran, and he filled it with an unending series of if-onlies. If only I had tucked the blaster pistol into my waistband when I took the carbine. If only I had the stiletto. If only I'd been more quiet in my advance....

Self-recriminations clogged his mind and fed the despair slowly creeping into his head.

Then his father stood up and the glow rod on his carbine burned to life. Illuminated by its backlight, Hal Horn stood twenty meters away, the carbine held steady in his right hand. He presented Thyne with a profile-offering him a target other than Corran. The expression on his father's face bore a gravity Corran had not seen since his mother's funeral. Hal's eyes seemed purged of anger and fear, but full of intent.

"It is my duty to inform you, Zekka Thyne, that I am inspector Hal Horn of the Corellian Security Force and you are under arrest. I have a valid warrant for your apprehension for violations of smuggling laws.

Let your hostage go and stop making things more difficult for yourself."

Thyne's chuckle came low and ringing with contempt.

"No, this is the way it's going to go. You're going to remove your finger from the trigger and lower your blaster."

"I can't do that."

"You will do that." Thyne tightened his hold on Corran's neck.

"My eyesight is good enough even in full darkness here that I can tell if your finger so much as twitches toward pulling the trigger. And my reflexes are good enough that I'll pump three shots through your partner's head before you complete that move. You may get me, but your partner will be dead. Do it, now!"

Hal frowned. "Okay, don't do anything rash."

"Don't, Hal! Shoot him...."

Thyne jammed the gun harder into Corran's jaw. "You were stupid enough to join CorSec, let's not be stupid enough to die for it."

Hal's left hand came up. "Okay, I'm doing what you said. I'm pulling my finger off the trigger."

Corran tried to shake his head to tell his father not to comply with Thyne's order. He has to know that the second he disarms himself, Thyne will shoot me and then shoot him. I may already be dead, but no reason for him to die, too.

Hal Horn's right index finger slowly unhooked itself from the blaster carbine's trigger. As it did so the glow rod's backlight washed all color from the digits. The finger straightened and Corran saw bones pointing at him. It's over. We'll both be skeletons left here to molder forever.

Then the blue bolt shot from the carbine's muzzle. The air crackled and Corran's hair stood on end as the bolt sizzled past him and hit Thyne. The blue nimbus resulting from the shot sent a tingle through Corran's body and weakened him enough that he fell to his hands and knees. Behind him Thyne's

body hit the ground with a heavy thump accompanied by the light clatter of the blaster pistol dancing off into the darkness.

Hal dropped to one knee beside his son, then pumped another stun round into Thyne. "Are you okay, son?"

Corran sat back on his heels. "I will be." He rubbed at the side of his neck with his right hand. "He gave me a bruise to balance the one Kast gave me. Having blaster bruises on my head and neck is an experience I could have done without."

"Beats having the bolts hit home, as our friend here discovered."

Corran looked at Thyne in the light from Hal's carbine.

The area around Thyne's right eye had begun to swell indicating where the bolt had hit him. "How did you...?"

Hal smiled. "The little gold diamond in his eye gave me a great target. I just focused on it-setting aside my concerns for you so I could-and hit him."

He frowned at his father. "No, not that. You had your finger clear of the trigger and the gun fired anyway. How did you do that?"

The spice vapor back there give you some sort of telekinetic power or something?"

"Me, move something with the power of my mind?"

Hal shook his head and brandished the carbine. "This is a hotshot. At the same time I pulled my index finger off the trigger, - I was able to bring my middle finger up and stroke the trigger. Nothing special or unusual, just sneaky."

Despite the smile on his father's face, and the cold logic of his answer, Corran couldn't shake the feeling that his father wasn't telling the entire truth. He probably doesn't want me to know how chancy his move was, but at least he had the guts to make it. I wouldn't have wanted to be in his boots for all the spice in the galaxy.

Hal handed Corran Thyne's blaster pistol, then hauled Thyne to his feet and tossed him over his shoulder. "I can feel a breeze from ahead.

We're almost clear."

Corran retrieved his own blaster carbine and carried it by the pistol-grip in his left hand while using the blaster pistol in his right hand and its glow rod to light their way out. "I see something up ahead. Stars and Selonia out there."

The two CorSec agents got clear of the cavern fairly easily. The mouth of it had been blocked with a lattice of iron bars with a door in it similar to those of the prison they'd escaped earlier. Corran shot the lock open then led the way out into a small grassy clearing.

Hal laid Thyne out on the ground and brought his blaster carbine to hand again. "Check him for a comlink.

We can call for transport to come get us."

Corran knelt over the body and began to search it when a vaguely mechanical sounding voice snapped an order at him.

"Drop the weapons, hands in the air." The first of eight stormtroopers emerged like ghosts from the trees surrounding the clearing. Their armor bone-white in the reflected moonlight, they made themselves very easy targets. The fact that each of them brandished a blaster carbine prompted Corran to raise his hands. I can't imagine any of them has a weapon set on stun.

Hal lowered his carbine to the ground carefully. "I'm Inspector Hal Horn and this is my partner, Corran Horn.

We're with CorSec. We've just apprehended Zekka Thyne."

The leader of the stormtroopers approached Hal.

"Looks as if you are trying to help Thyne escape and are lying to me."

Corran frowned. "What a stupid conclusion to draw. I don't know why you've got that big helmet to protect your head because there clearly isn't anything you're putting to good use under it."

The stormtrooper swung his gun to cover Corran. "On your feet, Black Scummer."

Corran glanced at his father as he stood. "I guess we're their prisoners."
"

The stormtrooper shook his head. "Who said anything about taking prisoners?"

Hal's voice came low and calm, but full of intensity and power.

"I think I would want a specific order from a superior about shooting us. I think to operate otherwise would seriously jeopardize our career, and possibly your life."

The stormtrooper reoriented himself toward Hal and Corran thought for a moment he'd have to jump the man to prevent him from shooting Hal.

Corran would have gone for him, too, because he'd seen countless bodies that had ended up dead for making remarks that were no where near as confrontational. What held him back was the way the man's movements slowed as he watched Hal.

The stormtrooper wasn't reacting to the tone or challenge in the words, he was clearly considering their full import.

Will wonders never cease?

A comlink clicked inside the man's helmet and the murmurs of conversation hummed into the night. Corran smiled and shrugged at his father. Hal winked back and allowed himself the start of a grin.

The stormtrooper's head came up. "It'll be a minute or two wait."

Hal nodded, then jerked a thumb back toward the cave mouth.

"You'll want to have your squad secure that cavern. It leads back into Thyne's office. Your people can get inside and hit the towers from below because if shooting starts, your people are going to die taking that place."

The stormtrooper thought for a moment, then sent half his squad forward. The remaining trio set themselves up to watch the clearing perimeter while the leader kept his blaster on Corran and his father.

The night air had become a bit chilled and the fact that he'd been sweating earlier became readily apparent to Corran.

"Mind if I lower my arms? I'm getting cold."

The stormtrooper shook his head. "You can get colder."

"Nice night, isn't it?" Corran gave the man a toothy grin and hiked his arms up higher.

A soldier in the olive drab uniform of the Imperial Army broke through the brush, flanked by two more stormtroopers. The eight bar box with rank cylinders on each side worn (in his chest proclaimed him to be a Colonel.

His dark-eyed gaze flicked between father and son, then lingered on Thyne's body. "Zekka Thyne. You may put your hands down. I take it you must be the CorSec agents."

Hal nodded. "Hal Horn. This is my son, Corran. I have a disc that identifies me in my shoe. It also contains the open warrant CorSec has for searching this place and arresting Thyne. I can dig it out for you, if you wish, to prove who we are."

"I'm Colonel Veers and I believe you are who you say you are. My source indicated you would be coming out somewhere in this vicinity and even suggested we might want to backtrack you." He glanced at the stormtrooper who had threatened to kill them. "Apparently my reasons for dispatching this squad around here were not fully understood."

Hal shrugged. "No one got lit up, so no problem."

Corran pointed to Thyne. "We've gotten the nastiest of them out of there. There aren't many people left in there and, by now, they should all be Thyne's people."

Hal nodded. "You can safely consider it a free-fire zone."

"I'll remember that if they give us a reason to go in."

Veers smiled. "You didn't happen to notice any signs of Rebel agents or Rebellion supplies in there by any chance?"

"No, but as a CorSec Inspector, I do believe it is within my discretion to ask for assistance in serving a warrant and apprehending suspects."

Hal looked at the hillsides on either side of the valley.

"I should check with my liaison officer, but calling back to Crescent City from here would be impossible, so I guess I'm on my own."

Veers shook his head. "Pity."

"Indeed." Hal waved a hand toward the cavern. "Colonel, if you and your squad would care to assist me, I would be most appreciative."

"We always like working closely with local officials."

Veers gave Hal a nod and pointed his stormtroopers at the black hole.

"You heard him. No waiting for them to shoot first, we're clear to go."

The stormtroopers jogged forward in a clatter of armor.

Veers handed Hal a comlink. "Your transit code word is 'masterpiece.'"

At our perimeter just commandeer one of our landspeeders to get your prisoner out of here."

"Thanks." Hal, looking back toward the cave, pointed at a stream of green laser bolts coming from one of the mansion's towers toward the ground. "Looks like your war has started."

"Then we'll get in quickly and end it." Veers gave them a brief salute and ran off with his men.

Corran looked after the Imperial officer. "I thought Imps believed in leading from the rear."

"Not all of them, it seems." Hal grabbed Thyne's hands and hauled the man up onto his back. "Get the ankles there, will you?"

"Sure." Corran grabbed Thyne's ankles and trailed behind his father.

"So, is this the end of Black Sun on Corellia?"

"I doubt it. Two CorSec agents, a handful of smugglers and a bounty hunter who isn't a bounty hunter aren't going to be enough to bring Black Sun down. Even if the Colonel and his people level that place, Prince Xizor still has enough power and the resources to restore it to what it was before, and you have to know there are countless individuals willing to take Thyne's place."

Corran shivered. "Yeah, I'm afraid you're right. How depressing."

"Depressing?" Hal turned and looked back at his son.

"It's not depressing. As long as there are Horns to catch criminals, Prince Xizor is welcome to send all he cares to in our direction."

"And you don't find that prospect depressing?" Corran frowned at him.

"If it isn't depressing, what is it?"

"I think it's obvious, son." Hal's hearty laugh blotted out the whines of blasters being fired back and forth. "It's job security. It may not be easy work, and it's dangerous quite a bit of the time, but it's work that holds evil at bay and there's nothing better you can devote your life to doing."

Corran nodded and recalled a bit of conversation he'd had with Riij Winward. "And what will we do when the only evil left in the galaxy is the Empire?"

"That's a good question, Corran, a very good question."

Weariness seemed to creep into his father's voice.

"It's one that each person must answer for himself. I just hope, when the time comes for me to answer it, I'll have the wisdom to choose the right answer and the strength to act upon it."

"Me, too."

"You will, Corran, no doubt about that." Hal gave him a wink and a nod. "When the time comes, you'll see the light and those wallowing in darkness who move to oppose you will regret that decision throughout what little remains of their lives."

Part Four

by Timothy Zahn

Zekka Thyne's airspeeders were stored on the low end of a split-level section of the fortress roof, inside a bunker-like structure with a single entrance from the stronghold proper and a single hangar bay-style exit. Two guards were on duty, but their attention was turned outward, toward the distant blaster fire coming from the woods around the fortress, and neither noticed the shadowy bulk of Rathe Pairor moving quietly up behind them.

A pair of deceptively gentle-looking hand movements from the Tunroth, and both guards temporarily lost the ability to notice anything.

"I'll have to get you to teach me that trick," Trell commented, ducking down to peer through the window of a likely looking airspeeder.

The vehicle looked ordinary enough, but in the dim light he could see the add-on weapons control board tucked coyly away under the main panel on the passenger side. Perfect. "We'll take this one.

You still have that molecular stiletto?"

"Here," the Tunroth rumbled, pausing in his task of stripping the guards' weapons to dig the slender cylinder from his belt. "Should we not take one of the armored vehicles instead?" he added, pointing his chin horns toward one of the three KAAC Freerunners parked near the wide exit opening as he lobbed the weapon in Trell's direction.

"They're a little obvious for in-town driving," Trell told him as he caught the stiletto. Extending the almost invisible blade, he began carefully cutting around the air-speeder's lock mechanism. "This one's got some hidden firepower-means it's probably got some hidden armor, too."

By the time pairor joined him, he had the door open and was sitting in the driver's seat. "Yeah, this'll do just fine," he said, pulling the weapons board out for a closer look. "Are you hunters any good with non-traditional stuff like light laser cannon and concussion grenade launchers?"

"A shturlan can work with all weapons," Pairor said, dropping his appropriated blaster rifles onto the rear seat and peering in over Trell's shoulder.

"Good-you're hired," Trell said, starting to strap himself in.

"I'll drive."

Trell wasn't sure what exactly was happening out in the woods surrounding Thyne's fortress. But whatever it was, it definitely seemed to be getting worse. The forest was alive with the muted flickers of multiple blaster fire, the light peeking coyly out through gaps in the leaf canopy on at least two sides of the stronghold. "I sure hope they're too busy out there to bother with us," he muttered as he eased the airspeeder through the opening and onto the landing pad just outside the bunker. "Corran and Hal are going to have their hands full getting through all that."

"But less trouble than it could be," Pairor said. "Do you not remember? Thyne has dispersed many of his people on errands."

Trell grimaced. "Yeah, I remember. One group to go grab our cargo, the other to snatch Maranne and Riiij."

"But at Jodo Kast's recommendation," Pairor reminded him. "If Kast is truly here to oppose Thyne, then he will not allow harm to come to our companions."

"I don't buy that," Trell growled. "Even if Corran and Hal were right about that, it doesn't mean he cares slork droppings about the rest of us. And that assumes they were right, which we don't have any proof of. Personally, I'd say there's an even chance that Thyne and Kast cooked up the whole thing together to expose a couple of undercover CorSec agents and lure 'em into a trap. In which case, they're probably already dead."

"If so, then we should be likewise," Pairor pointed out.

"Who are we that Kast would allow us to escape."

"Yeah, well, we haven't exactly escaped yet," Trell reminded him tartly, eying the open air off the edge of the landing pad with stomach-churning apprehension. But procrastination wouldn't gain them anything except increased odds that someone inside the fortress would notice they were missing and raise the alarm.

And besides-thanks to Kast Maranne and Riiij were walking into a trap out there at the Mynock's Haven can-tina.

Had possibly already walked into it. Riiij he wasn't so much worried about-the guy was a Rebel agent and not his responsibility.

But Maranne was his partner, and he was shrugged if he'd abandon her to Thyne's thugs.

"We waste time," Pairor rumbled at his side. "I will not leave Riiij in danger."

"Likewise," Trell said, keying in the repulsorlifts and throwing power to the drive. He wouldn't leave Maranne, and Pairor wouldn't leave Riiij; and as the fortress roof dropped away beneath them he realized with hindsight's usual clarity that Kast had probably set up the various groupings with precisely those different loyalties in mind.

Though to what end, he still didn't know. And wasn't sure he wanted to.

He was still mulling over the question thirty seconds later when the two

TIE bombers dropped neatly into formation beside him.

They'd been sitting in the Mynock's Haven for nearly half an hour; and in Rij Winward's opinion, it was yet another bust. "They're not coming," he said quietly to the woman on the other side of the small table. "Whoever we were supposed to meet here, they aren't coming."

"I think you're right," Maranne Darmic growled back, scratching viciously at the nape of her neck. "Score another big fat zero for the great and marvelous Jodo Kast."

"The greatly incompetent, you mean," Rij said, looking with distaste at the yellow and red jebwa flower in the center of their table. Kast's datacard had specified the flower as their identification marker, but so far none of the cantina's other patrons had given it a second glance.

Considering the clientele, most of their first glances had been humiliating enough.

"Yeah," Maranne agreed. "It makes you seriously wonder about his chances of getting Trell and Pairor and the others out of Zekka Thyne's place."

"It makes me wonder if he even wants to get them out," Rij countered darkly.

Maranne eyed him closely. "You think this whole thing was a setup?"

"It's looking more and more that way," Rij said, scowling as he glanced around the cantina. "Look at the series of events. First he sends Trell to the wrong booth in Treasure Ship Row, which apparently tips off Thyne and his people that we're looking for Borbor Crisk.

Then he sends Trell, Pairor, and Hal back and lets them get snatched.

Finally, he goes there himself with Corran and sends us off on this idiot's errand. Someone in Kast's business can't possibly be that incompetent and have survived this long."

"You think it's someone else posing as Kast?" Maranne suggested.

"I mean, all we've ever seen is his armor."

"Possibly," Rij said. "But now remember where this whole mess actually started: aboard an Imperial Star Destroyer."

"With us squeezed into running an Imperial captain's errand."

Maranne swore gently. "You're right. How stupid can one group of people be, anyway?"

"We're in line for some prizes, all right," Riiij agreed.

"The only question is what exactly the game is that the Imperials are playing."

"I vote for them trying to stir up trouble between Thyne and Crisk," Maranne said. "Maybe looking for an excuse to come down hard on both sides."

"Using the spice and gems as bait," Riiij said. "Still, whatever Kast's going for, there's one thing he doesn't know."

Maranne smiled tightly. "That the cargo isn't aboard the Hopskip anymore."

"Exactly." Riiij dropped a couple of coins on the table and stood up.

"Come on, let's get out of here. Crisk's people aren't going to show."

"So what's our next move?" Maranne asked, standing up beside him.

"Kast's Plan B, I guess," Riiij said, turning toward the door and elbowing them a path through a pack of loiterers.

"We take our sample boxes to Thyne's fortress and see if we can make a deal to buy Trell and Pairor out."

Maranne caught up to his side. "You're going to follow Kast's plan?"

she asked incredulously. "What are you, crazy?"

"No, just desperate," Riiij conceded grimly. "Aside from the two of us storming the place, I don't see any other options."

"What about your-" Maranne threw a quick glance around and lowered her voice. "What about your friends?"

Riiij grimaced. His friends: the Rebel Alliance. A reasonable enough request, he supposed, especially since the only reason he and Pairor had been aboard the Hopskip in the first place was to baby-sit the load of blasters Trell and Maranne had agreed to smuggle to the Rebels on Derra IV.

Unfortunately-"They can't help us," he told her regretfully.

"Even if the leaders agreed, it would take too long to gather together enough of a force to take on Thyne, Corellian Security, and the local Imperial garrison."

"You sure they just don't want Prince Xizor and Black Sun mad at them?"

Maranne asked nastily.

"You have to pick your fights carefully, Maranne," Riiij sighed.

"Personally, I think we've already bit off more than we can swallow."

"I suppose you're right," Maranne muttered. "Fine."

Let's give Plan B a try."

They had reached the door now, sliding their way through the middle of an incoming group of Duros and heading out into the muggy night air.

The Hopskip's dilapidated landspeeder was parked in the small lot to the left-"Excuse me?" a hesitant voice called.

Riiij turned, his hand dropping automatically to the butt of his blaster. A heavysset man had emerged from the cantina a handful of steps behind them, their jebwa flower clutched in a meaty hand.

"Yes?"

"You forgot your flower," the man said, lobbing it through the air toward him. Automatically, Riiij reached up to catch And suddenly there was a small blaster in the heavy man's fist. "Nice and easy," the man said. "Selty?"

"I'm on it," a voice said from somewhere behind Riiij.

There was a quick set of approaching footsteps, and Riiij felt his blaster being lifted from its holster. Another moment, and Maranne had been disarmed as well. "Got 'em."

"Now just keep moving," the first gunman said, gesturing Riiij and Maranne in the direction they'd been going.

"Let's go take a look at your landspeeder."

The parking lot was dark and deserted. But it wasn't going to stay deserted for long. Even as Riiij led the way toward the landspeeder he could see shadowy forms drifting in from all directions.

Whoever had gotten the drop on them didn't seem interested in taking any chances.

"You want to tell us which one's yours?" the heavyset man asked.

"You want to tell us whose side you're on?" Riiij countered.

The other's eyes flashed. "Don't push it, scum," he warned harshly.

"You're in enough trouble with us as it is."

"Must be with Zekka Thyne," Maranne said ruefully.

"Must be," Riiij agreed, his heart pounding a little harder. So it was definitely to Plan B now. "It's that dirt-brown one over there."

Two of the approaching thugs veered toward the land-speeder, the rest forming a loose but competent enough guard circle around the prisoners and their two escorts.

A double-sided circle, Riiij noted with interest, with as many of their members facing outward as inward. Expecting trouble, maybe?

The thugs had the storage compartment open now and with grunts of satisfaction hauled out the two sleight boxes. "Got 'em, Grobber," one of them said. "Couple of sleight boxes, just like the man said."

"All set to fill up, huh?" the heavyset man said, throwing a dark look at Riiij. "I guess Kast wasn't blowing smoke rings after all."

Riiij threw a glance at Maranne, got the same look in return from her.

They'd been right; Kast was definitely playing some crazy double - or triple-edged game here.

"Kast told you about this?" he asked.

"Sure did," Grobber assured him. "So what were these for, the first payment?"

Riiij shook his head. "Sorry, but I can't help you. We were hired to

deliver the boxes and that was it."

"Sure," Grobber growled. "Just deliver the boxes: And if Crisk just happened to fill them up while your back was turned-well, hey, that's none of your business, right?"

Promk, what the frink are you doing?"

"What does it look like?" one of the men at the land-speeder retorted.

He had carried one of the boxes around to the hood and was in the process of popping the seal with a knife. "A couple of wise guys, a couple of empty boxes; I figured it might be fun to send 'em on to Crisk with their heads inside."

Rij was suddenly aware of his collar pressing against his throat.

"I don't think that would be a good idea," he said, striving to keep his voice even. "You don't know where the rest of the boxes are."

"We don't, huh?" Grobber sneered, digging out a comlink and thumbing it on. "Skinkner? Hey, Skinkner, look alive."

"Funny, Grobber, funny," a twisted voice came back.

"What d'ya want?"

"You at the Dewback Storage Warehouse yet?"

"Yeah, 'course we are. If you were hoping to report us to Thyne for slogging off, you're out of luck."

"Wouldn't think of it," Grobber said, sending another sneer toward Rij. "Still think we don't know where the rest of the boxes are, hotshot?"

Rij felt his stomach tighten. So much for Plan B. So much, too, for any leverage they might have had against Thyne and his mob. Any chance of rescuing Pairor and Trell was now squarely in his and Maranne's laps.

Assuming they were able to find a way out of this, their own private mess. Carefully, keeping his movements casual, Rij looked around the ring of thugs, trying to formulate some kind of reasonable plan-"Mother of smoke/" Rij jerked his head back around. Standing beside the landspeeder, Promk had finally gotten the sleight box open.

.. and even in the faint light Riiij could see the stunned look on his face. "Grobber-you gotta-what the frinkingm?"

"Have you gone dust-happy?" Grobber demanded, striding toward him. He got two steps, and then suddenly his face changed, too. "What the-." he gasped, all but leaping the rest of the distance to Promk's side.

Riiij sniffed the night breeze carefully, caught the faint odor of spice. "You were saying something about empty boxes?" he asked.

Grobber ignored him. "Get the other one open," he ordered, pulling out a knife of his own and probing delicately into the spice.

"Selty, get over here. The rest of you, watch for trouble."

Selty joined his boss as Promk brought around the second box and set to work, and for a moment the two thugs conversed in low voices over the spice box. The debate was interrupted by the crack of breaking duraplast, and the two joined Promk by the second box.

Someone whistled in awe. "Grobber-are those-?" "Durindfire gems," Grobber said, lifting his eyes like twin turbolasers to Riiij's face.

"Let's have it, pal, and let's have it straight and fast. What the frink kind of game are you playing, anyway?"

"I told you before: we're not playing any games," Riiij told him.

"We were sent to deliver the cargo, and that's it.

If there's a game going on, someone else is running it."

"Kast," one of the other thugs snarled.

"Or Kast and Crisk," Grobber snarled back, yanking out his comlink again. "Skinkner? Wake up, Skinkner."

"What d'ya want?" the other's voice demanded. "Frink it all, Grobber-" "Shut up and listen," Grobber bit out. "You looked in any of those boxes yet?"

"Course not. Thyne said to just watch them until Crisk's blaster-boys came to fill them with-" "You idiot-they're already full," Grobber snapped.

"Which means the contract's already been filled."

The voice on the comlink swore. "Kast."

"That's my bet," Grobber said. "Start getting your boys together-I'm going to raise Control." He keyed the comlink again.

"Control? This is Grobber. Control?"

"Grobber!" a new voice half barked, half gasped.

"We've been trying to raise you for half an hour-where the frink are you?"

"At the Mynock's Haven," Grobber said. "Listen-" "No, you listen," the other cut him off. "We're under attack here, skrag it-you've got to get back right away."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," Grobber said. "What attack?"

Who's attacking?"

"Who do you think? The frinking Imperials, that's who."

Grobber threw a startled glance at selty. "The Imperials?"

"Started out as some anti-Rebel operation," Control said. "At least, that's what they told us. Then someone took a shot at them, and suddenly here they are, burning their way through the east wall."

"Skrag! Where's Thyne?"

"I don't know-we can't find him."

"Must have gotten out," Selty muttered.

"Or ducked into some private bunker," Grobber said.

"All right, Control, we're on our way. Skinkner?"

"We're packing up, too," Skinkner's voice confirmed.

"You want us to do anything with these other sleight boxes?"

"To blazes with the boxes," Control snapped. "We need you here."

"No, pack 'em up and bring 'em along," Grobber said.

"Grobber-" "They're worth a fortune," Grobber growled.

"Thyne'll have our heads if we leave 'em behind. Come on, how much trouble can a few Imperials be?"

Faintly over the comlink came the sound of a distant explosion.

"That answer your question?" Control snarled. "Get the frink back here."

And with a sudden hiss, the comlink went dead.

"They're jamming it," Grobber growled, shoving the cylinder back into his belt. "Sely, you take Promk and Bullkey and get these two and their landspeeder back to the fortress. Everyone else, back to the airspeeders. Move it!"

The others scattered. "Don't get any ideas," Grobber warned softly, glaring from under creased eyebrows at Riiij and Maranne.

"We're a long ways from being done with you two yet."

With that he stomped off after the rest of his mob, disappearing just as they had appeared back into the shadows again. "Get over here," Sely snapped, Waving Riiij and Maranne forward. Somewhere in the distance an avian or insect whistled, sounding strangely out of place in the urban setting. "Bullkey?"

"I'm on 'em," a deep voice came from behind Riiij, the confidence backed up by a blaster nudge in the back.

"Com on, move it."

Riiij started forward; and as he did so, Maranne veered slightly toward him and nudged him with her elbow. "Get ready," she murmured, just loud enough for him to hear.

At the landspeeder Promk, under Sely's direction, had picked up the box containing the Durindfire gems and was carrying it back toward the storage compartment.

The strange avian whistled again; and suddenly, inexplicably, one of the bottom edges of the box split open, spilling the gems out onto the ground.

"Promk!" Sely squeaked, aghast. "You stupid idiot."

He jumped forward, grabbing at the box as Promk tried to turn it upside down. For a moment they both fumbled with it, the prisoners temporarily forgotten - And from behind Riiij came a short gurgle and a muffled thump.

Beside him, he sensed Maranne preparing to charge.

"Not yet," he muttered, touching her warningly as he lengthened his stride. Preoccupied with the spilled gems, Selty and Promk hadn't yet noticed what had happened over here. Another four paces...

three... if they'd just fight with the box another few seconds...

one....

"Now," he murmured; and jumping forward, he put his left palm down on the landspeeder's hood and leaped over the vehicle to slam both feet hard against Promk's chest.

The thug didn't even have a chance to gurgle as he hit the ground, the sleight box spinning out of his hands into the darkness. Selty did have time for a startled curse and a grab for his holstered blaster before he went down with Maranne on top of him. A savage jab with her knee, and he went limp.

"Are you injured?" Pairor rumbled from behind them.

"No, we're fine," Riiij assured him, regaining his balance and turning around. Behind the Tunroth, the third thug was lying in an unnaturally crumpled heap. "Nice job with Bullkey," he added.

"Not to mention the box," Maranne added, retrieving their appropriated blasters from Selty's belt and tossing Riiij's back to him.

"How'd you manage that one?"

"That was mine," Trell said, stepping out from behind one of the other parked landspeeders and crossing to them. "Just an exquisitely well-thrown molecular stiletto."

"A whistle code and a molecular stiletto," Riiij said, shaking his head wonderingly. "You two are just full of tricks, aren't you?"

"The stiletto was a gift," Trell said, crouching down beside the sleight box. "Blast-the blade's broken."

"Never mind the blade," Maranne said, crouching down beside him.

"Get the gems."

"Forget the gems," Rij told her, peering off in the direction Grobber and the others had gone. The rescue had been remarkably quiet, but if Grobber took it into his head to fly over this spot on the way back to Thyne's fortress, the four of them could still end up fertilizing a patch of razor grass. "Let's just get out of here."

"But-" "No, he's right," Trell said through clearly clenched teeth.

"If whatever's going on back at Thyne's place dies down fast enough we could still find Grobber's buddies camping out in the Hopskip's cargo bay. Just grab the box and whatever's still left inside."

Maranne hissed something vile sounding, but she nevertheless stood up, the now half-empty box in her hands.

"Fine," she said bitterly. "What about the spice?"

"Leave it here," Trell told her. "Corran said we wouldn't want to get caught shipping spice, and I'm rather inclined to agree with him."

"We can call CorSec on the way and tell them where to pick it up," Rij added. "Now let's go."

They all piled into the landspeeder. "Speaking of Corran and CorSec," Trell commented as he spun the vehicle around and kicked power to the engines. "Turns out they're one and the same."

"Corran's with Corellian Security?" Maranne asked, frowning at him.

"You're joking."

"That's how he and Hal were talking, anyway," Trell said. "Last we saw, they were heading off after Thyne."

Rij winced. "In the middle of Thyne's fortress? They haven't got a chance."

"That was also our estimation," Pairor agreed. "But counting the number of Thyne's warriors here and those fighting the Imperials outside his stronghold, it seems likely the core areas within may have been nearly deserted."

"'Nearly' might not have been good enough," Maranne said. "And what about Kast? He was still there, wasn't he?"

"I've given up trying to guess what kind of game Kast is playing," Trell said, twisting the landspeeder hard to get around a Herglic-parked speeder truck. "All I know is that he's the one who gave Corran the molecular stiletto that got us out of there."

"And we do not believe it was merely a trap," Pairor added. "We were challenged by Imperial TIE bombers as we left the stronghold; yet upon identification, we were permitted to pass."

"That had to be Corran and Hal's doing," Trell said.

"CorSec's supposed to be working pretty closely with the Imperials these days."

"Yes," Rijj murmured, thinking back to the brief argument he'd had with Corran about the Rebellion. And now to find out Corran was actually CorSec. Could he have guessed Rijj's true loyalties from that conversation?

"We were both permitted to pass," Pairor reminded him softly.

"I understand," Rijj told him. "I also understand that the way everything else here's been going, that doesn't mean a whole lot. If we get to the Hopskip without running into an ambush-from any of the sides of this crazy powerplay-then maybe I'll believe we've gotten away with it."

"Gotten away with what?" Maranne asked.

Rijj spread his hands. "With whatever in blazes we did here."

There was indeed no ambush poised outside the Hop-skip. Nor were any of their former companions Corran, Hal, or Kast-waiting there.

What was there was a single datacard.

"Looks like the same stuff that Kast used to stick the molecular stiletto to Corran's cell bars," Trell commented, poking experimentally at the bits of adhesive residue that had been left on the datacard.

"Should we read it here, or inside?"

"Inside," Rijj said firmly, taking the datacard from him and glancing around. "And not until we're out of here."

You and Maranne get the pre-flight started; Pairor and I'll check to make sure no one left us any surprises."

Trell had the engines nursed and sputtering to life, and Maranne had the nav computer working on their course, when Riiij and pairor returned from their tour of the ship.

"Looks clean," Riiij told the others as the two of them took their seats. "Or at least, there's nothing obvious. You talked to the tower yet?"

"We're third in line to leave," Maranne told him. "You want to read us a sleepy-time story now?"

"Sure," Riiij said. From behind Trell came a faint rubbing sound-Riiij getting the last bits of adhesive off the datacard, probably-and then the brief scraping as he slid it into his datapad.

"It's from Kast," Riiij said. "'To the crew and passengers of the Hopskip: well done.'"

"Well done!" Maranne growled. "What in blazes-?"

"Shh," Trell cut her off. "Go on."

"'You have adequately completed the mission that was assigned you,'" Riiij continued. "'You may return now to the Admonitor and retrieve your cargo. This datacard will serve as proof to Captain Niriz that you have fulfilled your side of the bargain and may have your cargo returned to you.'" Then it's signed with his name and what looks like some kind of ID mark."

"So he's not going back, huh?" Trell said, an odd feeling stirring in the pit of his stomach. "I'm not sure I like that."

"He must have arranged his payment to be delivered somewhere else," Maranne said. "It didn't look like he and Niriz got along very well."

"Perhaps his payment is in the remainder of the sleight boxes," pairor said.

"I wouldn't count on it," Riiij said. "There's a postscript: 'Do not return to the Dewback Storage Warehouse for the other sleight boxes.

They are empty."

"What?" Trell growled, half turning to glare back at Riij over his shoulder. "Come on, now, that's just crazy."

You're telling me the two boxes you happened to take to the Mynock's Haven were the only ones with anything in them? What are the odds of that happening?"

"Not too bad, really," Maranne said grimly. "Not when you consider that they were the only two we knew we could open and then reseal again. They were leading us around by the nose the whole way, weren't they?"

"The whole way," Riij agreed. "And don't bother with either the Durindfire gems or the spice. Both are counterfeit."

Trell looked across the cockpit, to find Maranne looking back at him.

There didn't seem to be anything to say.

There was another faint scraping behind him as Riij pulled the datacard from the datapad. "Look, we got in and out again alive," he reminded them, reaching over Trell's shoulder to hand him the datacard.

"My instructors used to say that no mission you walked away from was a complete failure. Maybe we'll meet Corran and Hal someday and find out what this whole thing was all about."

Trell turned the datacard over in his hand. "I doubt it," he said.

"I'd say chances are good that neither of them knew what was going on, either."

He slid the datacard into a storage slot on his board.

"Come on, Maranne. Let's get out of here."

"I know this sort of thing embarrasses you," Captain Niriz said as he poured his guest a glass of aged R'alla mineral water, "so I'll only say it once. When I heard the reports of military action on Corellia, I was concerned for your safety. I'm glad to find out my fears were unfounded."

"Thank you, Captain," Grand Admiral Thrawn said, accepting the proffered glass and taking a sip. He was still wearing his Jodo Kast armor, though without the helmet and gauntlets. "You're wrong, though, about expression of concern and support being an embarrassment. On the contrary, loyalty is one of the two qualities I value most in my subordinates and colleagues."

"And the other?" Niriz asked, pouring a glass of R'alla water for himself.

"Competence," Thrawn said. "Has the Hopskip's cargo been reloaded aboard yet?"

"It's being done, sir," Niriz said. With most people, he thought distantly, the addition of Mandalorian armor would instantly create a powerful air of strength and mystery.

With Thrawn, in contrast, it almost seemed to detract from the sense of authority that was already there.

"The bridge has orders to let me know when they leave."

He cocked an eyebrow. "Which reminds me: you promised to let me know what all this was about when you returned."

"And I intend to do so," Thrawn assured him. "I'm waiting for one other person to join us here first."

Behind Niriz, the door slid open. Niriz turned, opening his mouth to reprimand whoever this officer or crewer was who would dare enter the captain's private office without permission-And an instant later was scrambling to his feet, the harsh words dying in his throat as if they'd been choked to death. The armored figure striding with casual arrogance through the door-"Ah; Lord Vader," Thrawn said, rising more easily to his feet. "Welcome aboard the Admonitor. We're honored by your presence."

"As we are with yours, Admiral Thrawn," Lord Darth Vader said, a distinct edge of challenge in his deep voice.

"You're nearly six hours late."

"I know, my Lord, and I apologize for keeping you waiting," Thrawn said, nodding his head deferentially.

"As it turned out, I was forced to significantly modify the plan I originally outlined to you."

"But the objective was achieved?" Vader demanded.

"It was indeed," Thrawn said. "Zekka Thyne and the Corellian branch of Prince Xizor's Black Sun have been effectively eliminated."

Niriz looked at Thrawn in surprise. "Zekka Thyne? But I thought-" "You thought the Emperor had an arrangement with Xizor?"

Vader demanded, turning that grisly mask toward him.

Niriz swallowed. Vader's reputation concerning flag officers who had displeased him... but on the other hand, Thrawn demanded absolute honesty from his subordinates.

"Yes, my Lord," he said. "I did."

Vader's stiff posture seemed to ease slightly. "For the moment, perhaps, that is true. But such arrangements are made to be altered."

He turned back to Thrawn. "Yet I understood there was Imperial action against Thyne's stronghold."

"A small battle only," Thrawn assured him. "And the battle was instigated from Thyne's side, as both sides' recorders will bear out."

The record will also show the Imperials were in the area solely because of information their commander received suggesting a Rebel force was gathering in the forest there."

"Information which you supplied, of course?" Vader asked.

"Of course," Thrawn nodded. "And since there can be no possible link between the verification code I used and any of your forces or contacts, Prince Xizor will be unable to create any connection between you and the mysterious informant."

"Yet Imperial troops were involved," Vader persisted.

"His first thought will certainly be of me."

Thrawn shook his head. "In fact, my Lord, the marginal Imperial involvement will actually tend to exonerate you in his eyes. He would expect you to launch either a full-fledged Imperial attack which he could easily trace back to you-or else to scrupulously avoid Imperial forces entirely, relying perhaps on your quiet bounty hunter or mercenary contacts. The ambiguity of the actual event will leave him confused and uncertain. Which, I believe, was one of your key objectives."

"It was," Vader said, sounding a little uncertain. "But as you say, Xizor

knows of my bounty hunter connections.

Even though Jodo Kast is not among them, your assassination of Thyne while disguised as Kast will again lead his attention to me."

Thrawn smiled. "Yes, but I didn't assassinate Thyne. I was able to leave his fate in the hands of a pair of undercover CorSec agents."

Vader cocked his head slightly to the side. "I don't recall Corellian Security ever being mentioned in our discussions, Admiral."

"The two agents attached themselves to my group," Thrawn said.

"And it was obvious right from the start that they were in Coronet City for the specific purpose of getting to Thyne. It presented such a perfect opportunity that I decided to modify the original plan so that they would be the ones to deal with him."

"Then Thyne isn't dead?"

Thrawn shrugged. "At the very least he's out of power," he said.

"Actually, having him in CorSec custody would actually serve your purposes better than a quick death. It would leave Prince Xizor wondering if the Corellians were digging any dangerous secrets out of him. A major distraction; and distraction, I believe, was another of your key objectives."

There was a tone from the comm. Stepping to the console, Niriz keyed it on. "Niriz," he said.

"Hangar Bay Control, sir," a voice said. "Reporting as per orders that the Hopskip has just left."

"Thank you," Niriz said. "Signal the bridge to watch its vector when it jumps to lightspeed."

"Yes, sir."

Niriz keyed the comm off. "I gather the smugglers and their Rebel friends performed their part adequately?" Vader asked.

"Quite adequately," Thrawn assured him. "They provided the necessary excuse for me to move Thyne's men out and clear the way for the CorSec agents."
"

The unseen eyes behind the black mask seemed to bore into Thrawn's face. "And the other part of your plan?"

Thrawn cocked a blue-black eyebrow at Niriz, "Captain?"

"Yes, sir," Niriz said. "A homing device has been installed inside each of the hidden blasters they were smuggling."

"And the boxes repacked exactly as they were?"

"To the millimeter," Niriz confirmed. "They'll have no way of knowing the boxes were even opened, let alone tampered with."

The Dark Lord nodded. "Excellent," he said.

The comm pinged again. "Captain, this is the bridge.

The Hopskip just jumped to lightspeed. Their vector's confirmed for the Shibric system."

"Thank you." Niriz looked at Thrawn, lifted his eyebrows.

The Grand Admiral nodded. "Have them prepare a course back to the Unknown Regions," he instructed.

"Our task here is finished."

"Yes, sir." Niriz gave the order and keyed off the comm.

"Unless," Thrawn added, looking at Vader, "you'd like me to deal with Prince Xizor directly for you."

"It is indeed a tempting thought," Vader said, his voice dark with veiled menace. "One alien against another? But no. Xizor is mine."

"As you wish," Thrawn said. "Incidentally, I doubt that Shibric is the final destination for those Rebel blasters.

From their vector, and other bits and pieces I gleaned along the trip, my guess is that their ultimate collection point will be somewhere in the Derra system."

"The homing devices will show us for certain," Vader said. "But the Derra system is rumored to have a strong Rebel presence. I'll make sure to have some forces waiting there."

"Very good," Thrawn said. "One final suggestion, and then I suspect we must both be on our separate ways. I understand the general in command of the Executor's ground forces resigned suddenly a month ago.

I was able to watch the battle outside Thyne's stronghold for a while as I waited to make sure the smugglers escaped; and in my opinion the Imperial officer in command is being wasted in a garrison assignment."

"Your opinion carries considerable weight," Vader said. "As I'm sure you know. The officer's name?"

"Colonel Veers," Thrawn said. "From the level of his tactical skill, I'd also say he's long overdue for a promotion.

Perhaps his political connections within the command structure leave something to be desired."

"Political connections do not concern me," Vader rumbled, stepping to the door. "I will see what I can do with this Colonel Veers. Thank you, Admiral."

"My pleasure, Lord Vader," Thrawn said with a respectful tilt of his head. "One favor for another. Perhaps we'll have the chance to work again together."

Once again, the hidden eyes seemed to probe the Grand Admiral's face.

"Perhaps," he said. "Farewell, Admiral."

And with a swirl of his long cloak he was gone. "An interesting exercise," Thrawn commented, crossing to the R'alla bottle and refilling his and Niriz's glasses. "I don't know though. I sense that this Rebellion is more powerful and better organized than perhaps Lord Vader realizes. I hope our activities here will allow him to deliver a crushing blow against it."

His glowing red eyes glittered as he took a sip from his glass.

"But that's not our concern, at least for now. Our concern is the Unknown Regions; and it's time we were getting back."

"Yes, sir." Niriz hesitated. "If I may be so bold, Admiral...

your last comment implied that you received something in return for helping Vader against Thyne and Black Sun. May I ask what that favor was?"

"A very personal gift, Captain," Thrawn said. "Which was why I felt the need to personally orchestrate Thyne's destruction. Lord Vader has turned over to me command of a group of alien commandos who have proven themselves highly valuable to him over the years. While I won't have much use for them in the Unknown Regions, I have no doubt I'll eventually be returning to the Empire proper. At that time-well, we shall see what they can do."

"I never heard of Vader employing aliens," Niriz said doubtfully.

"Are you sure he's telling-well-" "The truth?" Thrawn smiled.

"Indeed he is. Mark their name well, Captain: the Noghri. I guarantee you'll be hearing more of them."

He drained his glass and set it down. "But now to the bridge.

The Unknown Regions are calling; and we have a great deal of work yet to do."



Food and Shelter

Alzoc III's frigid gale flapped Pter Thanas' heavy thermal uniform coat, and gusts rattled his bones. Crossing his arms over his chest conserved warmth; climbing back into his terrain crawler would help much more, and he would do it in about one minute. He stood in the crawler's lee, sheltered but buffeted. Thick, dark goggles shielded his eyes against glare from Alzoc's frozen plains. During daylight, the huge, white-furred Talz natives shut their larger, lower eyes and peered through a smaller pair high in their round faces. Thanas's soldiers often mocked the four-eyed giants, but he found them oddly beautiful.

The pit looked like a wound in Alzoc's rocky soil. Its reddish sides dropped into shaded darkness. Mechanical conveyors carried out ore, but the furry Talz slave miners, once lowered into the pit, never emerged. Thanas' men peri-

odically pushed young aliens over the side, replacing the miners who died (starved, most of them) or were injured. It sounded cruel, but their thick fur softened the landings far below.

Besides, Alzoc turned only a marginal profit. Corners must be cut. Those had been Pter Thanas' orders.

But he'd climbed this vantage point daily for the last several days. Staring down into the pit, he watched the aliens labor. He had compared three dozen individuals' productivity, scoring them on his datapad. Today, he was sure: The bigger and rounder ones moved faster, and it was no simple matter of youth versus age. They shared their meager rations painstakingly, rather than fighting to ensure that the strong survived. The Talz were as kindly as they looked.

If his workers ate better ... If they worked harder and faster ... wouldn't he show better profits for the Empire?

He reached into a deep coat pocket. Datapads issued for cold-climate work had oversized keys, to ease operation wearing thermal gloves. He keyed up his budget for the food synthesis plant, divided by the number of workers below and their tribal families up above, sprinkled in several other variables, and ran the equation twice.

That snuffed his last doubt. If he fed the Talz twice as much, production might triple. He might even offer top producers edible bonuses.

Pter Thanas tucked the datapad back into his coat and turned toward his terrain crawler. His driver opened the door from inside. "Base," Thanas snapped as he climbed on board. "Full speed." As he sat down out of the wind, his muscles relaxed. The warmth felt good. So did his decision.



The Empire Strikes Back

(A holomessage to the military hierarchy and Grand Moffs of the Galactic Empire from the Emperor's advisor, Ars Dangor.)

Loyal subjects,


The recent setback at the Battle of Yavin has resulted in a few changes to Imperial doctrine. As you are aware, we have lost both the Death Star and its commander, Grand Moff Tarkin. But the doctrine of fear has not been rescinded because of this minor victory for the insignificant rebellion.

Instead, the doctrine of fear must be broadened and upgraded. It is time to let that fear spread, time for the Empire to strike back at its enemies and destroy them once and for all. That is why the Emperor has placed his servant, Lord Darth Vader, in command of a special Imperial fleet. This fleet, led by Lord Vader's new *Super-class* Star Destroyer *Executor*, has been charged with the mission to hunt down the rebel command base and those rebels that escaped us at Yavin.

You are to bow to Lord Vader's wishes as though they were the Emperor's own, extending him every possible assistance he may require in the completion of his task. Soon, nothing will remain to threaten the Emperor's rule.

For the Emperor,

Imperial Advisor Ars Dangor



THE PLANET ELERION.
SOMEWHERE IN THE
OUTER RIM.

VISITORS COME HERE
FOR ONE REASON...

...TO GAMBLE.

SOME WITH THEIR
FORTUNES... OTHERS
WITH THEIR LIVES.

Lucky Stars

WELCOME
TO ELERION,
PRINCESS LEIA.
WE'RE GLAD YOU
COULD MAKE
IT HERE SO
QUICKLY.

OF COURSE.
IT'S VITAL I
MAKE SURE THIS
MISSION IS A SUCCESS.
YOU'RE GENERAL
HUNDEEN--?

I AM.
NOW, LET'S
GET YOU
BRIEFED...



FEEL
FREE TO CALL
ME ORMA...RANK
DOESN'T CARRY
MUCH WEIGHT
HERE...

IF IT DID,
THE WEIGHT
WOULD
EVAPORATE
IN THIS HEAT
AND HUMIDITY.
HOW DO YOU
STAND IT?

YOU
GET USED
TO IT.



PRINCESS
LEIA, ALLOW ME
TO PRESENT THE
TROOPS YOU'LL BE
WORKING WITH...MY
BEST AGENTS...



ZEELA
NALL.



NURI
PRAVADA.



SHEYNE
TYNDOŚ.

PLEASD
TO MEET YOU...
PRINCESS.



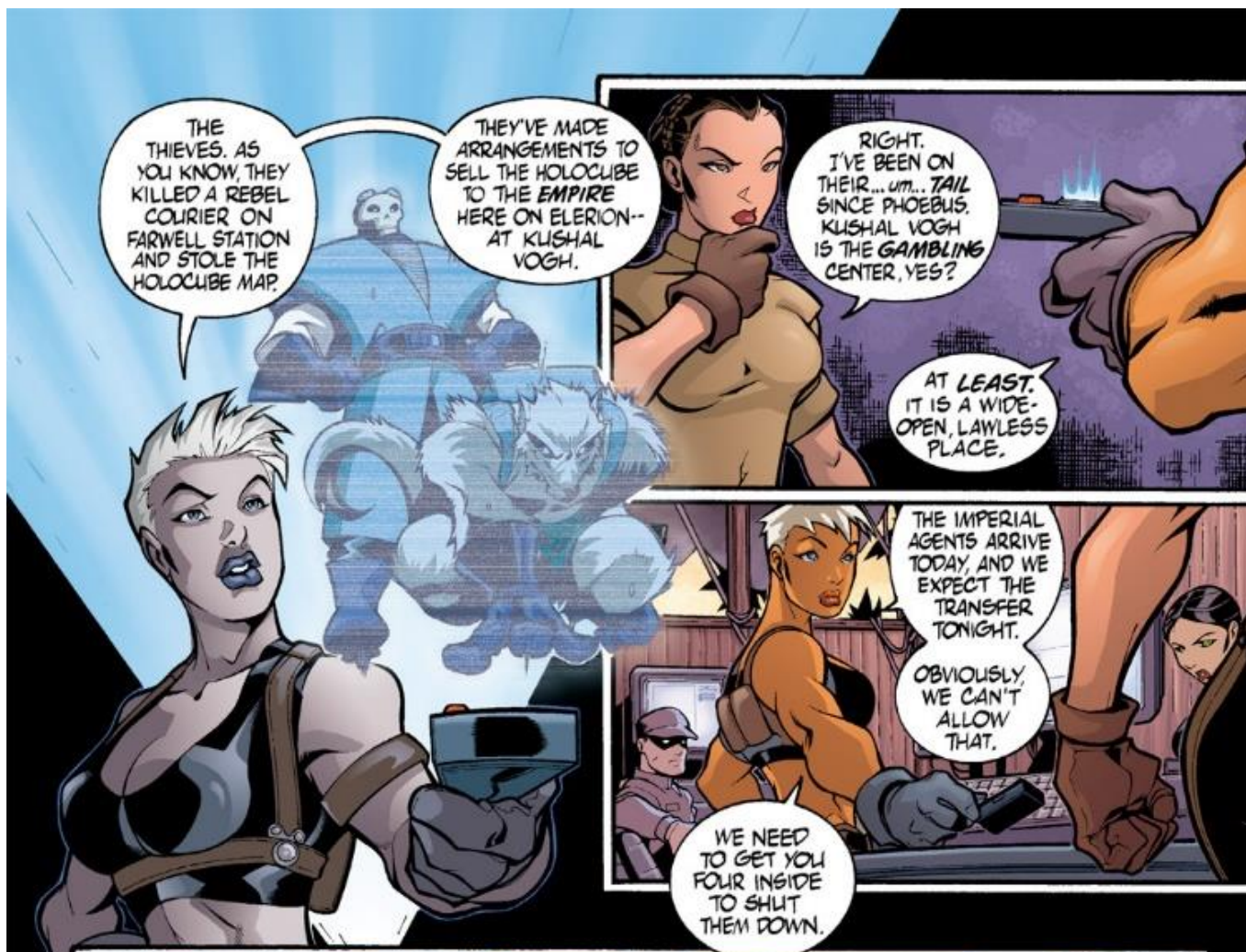
...
CALL
ME LEIA,
PLEASE.

I'M
PLEASD
TO MEET
YOU ALL.



NOW, AS
TO WHY
YOU'RE
HERE...

YES, THE
STOLEN DATA
REVEALING
THE LOCATION
OF THE
MAIN REBEL
BASES...







EXCUSE ME--?
GENTLEMEN--?

WHAT'S
HE GOT
THAT I
DON'T...?



I DON'T
BELIEVE I'VE
EVER SEEN
ANYONE SO...
TALL...

DON'T
WASTE YOUR
TIME ON HERMOS,
BEAUTIFUL,
HE'S JUST A
BODYGUARD...

...AND AN
ANDROID
TO BOOT.



LEI--
CALL ME
LENA.
WHERE
ARE WE
GOING?

I AM
NESCAN TAL'YO.
FREELANCE...IMPORT
EXPERT. I AM SO
GLAD TO MAKE
YOUR ACQUAINTANCE,
BEAUTIFUL
HUMAN. YOU
ARE...?



TO PLAY...
BUT NOT AT
THE GAMING
TABLES, eh?



"MUCH MORE FUN
TO BE HAD...UP IN
MY ROOM..."





COME ON NOW, NESCAN, LET'S NOT RUSH THINGS...

ONCE WE GET STARTED, I'LL TAKE THINGS NICE AND SLOW, I PROMISE!

THIS IS YOUR LUCKY NIGHT, MY DEAR...

TO BE IN THE COMPANY OF SUCH A GREAT SENTIENT? I'M SURE...

OH, BUT AS OF TODAY I AM AN INCREDIBLY WEALTHY ONE, TOO!

OH--?

AND POWERFUL TOO, NOW THAT I THINK OF IT.

YOU'RE LOOKING AT THE BEING WHO HOLDS THE FATE OF THE REBELLION IN HIS VERY PAW!

AND THE EMPIRE IS PAYING A PLANETARY FORTUNE FOR WHAT I HAVE TO SELL.

NO.

I WANT THAT HOLOCUBE RIGHT NOW, WEASEL!

Oh, drat. Hermos.







FORGET IT, LADY... I'VE NOTHING TO SAY.

EVEN IF YOU KILL ME, THE HOLOCLUBE STILL GETS TO THE EMPIRE, AND YOUR PRECIOUS REBELS ARE DOOMED!

...HOW ARE YOU AT HANDLING... PAIN?

OKAY, I BELIEVE YOU'RE NOT AFRAID TO DIE...

NOW, NOW... LET'S NOT BE HASTY...

THE HOLOCLUBE?

ALL RIGHT... BUT I DON'T HAVE IT. IT'S WITH MY PARTNER...

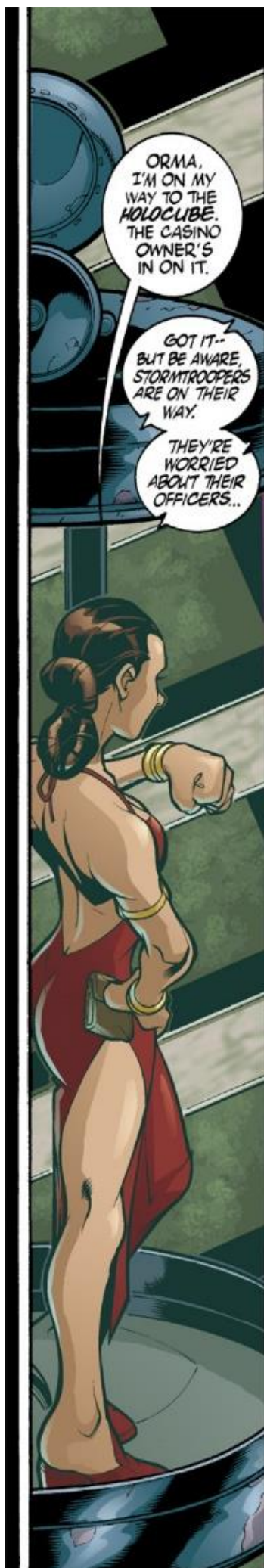
...GOGOL, THE CASINO OWNER!

WE CAN SHARE, THOUGH-- THERE'LL BE CREDITS ENOUGH FOR ALL OF US TO LIVE LIKE PASHAS!

NOW, WHY NOT UNTIE ME? UNLESS YOU LIKE THIS SORT OF THING?

Oh, SHUT UP.

THWAK





I THINK YOU HAVE THE WRONG DOOR, MY DEAR...

...THOUGH PERHAPS FATE HAS BROUGHT US TOGETHER--?



WHAT IS IT WITH YOU GUYS?

WHAT CAN I SAY? NOW, WHAT'S THIS ABOUT?



IT'S ABOUT YOU GIVING ME THE HOLOCUBE, GOGOL--BEFORE I TOAST YOUR TAIL!

OH, I SEE...



SEE WHAT? WHERE'S THE HOLOCUBE?

IT'S RIGHT HERE IN FRONT OF YOU!



IT'S HIDDEN UP THERE IN PLAIN SIGHT... BUT YOU'LL NEVER FIND IT IN A MILLION YEARS!

YOU MIS-UNDERSTAND. I DON'T NEED TO FIND IT...





The Hunt Within: Valane's Tale

Mission 1: Raid on Picutorion

Long after Luke Skywalker clashed with Valance, records discovered in the Boudolayz archives shed light on Valance's Imperial service.

According to the Boudolayz files, Beilert Valance registered for Imperial service as a native of Shinbone, a hardscrabble mining world in Wild Space, and said he'd lost both parents as a child to the Hardan Plague. After his enlistment, he was sent to the Empire's infamous heavy-gravity Sirpar training center in the Arkanis Sector. He thrived there and was assigned to the sector army of the Outer Rim's volatile Nembus Sector, where he saw extensive action against pirates and Rebel groups. Afterward, he was promoted to sergeant major of his stormtrooper platoon after the pacification of Praadost II. With the Nembus Sector campaign dying down, Valance's legion was assigned to the nearby Kwymar Sector, where his life would take a fateful turn.

The most detailed records concerned his squad's battles to take Rebel-held positions during the Alliance's frantic evacuation from the Outer Rim planet Picutorion. This took place during the Kwymar Suppressions, marked by ruthless Imperial assaults on Picutorion and its Kwymar Sector neighbors Protazk, Doniphon, Kestos Minor and Telos.

As a bounty hunter, Valance first gained notice for apprehending the berserker pirate Alabar Double Ax, whom he'd pursued from Sikurd to the Red Nebula; he confiscated the Sikurdian's ship and renamed it *Kill Switch*. He then assembled a gang of henchmen who helped him rout the Chorrán shipjackers operating out of Donadus in the Inner Rim's Bamula Sector and capture a slavers' ring on Thraisai -- missions that established him as an elite hunter.

Valance's employers knew him as a patient stalker who liked to hunt by consulting an array of infochants and rumor brokers, then let his instincts tell him where to intercept his prey. But they learned not to let droids near Valance, or to make inquiries about the grim-faced hunter's past.

Mission 2: Destroying the Past

The Kwymar Suppressions would be Valance's last mission for the Empire. The Picutorion raid was followed by an assault on Doniphon, where Rebel starfighters strafed the Imperial ground troops. A badly wounded Valance was left at Anglebay Station on Telos 4 to die. The medics there saved his life, but only by replacing half of his body with cybernetic parts.

His Imperial career ruined, Valance became a bounty hunter. Few, if any, knew of his past, though many noted his irrational hatred for mechanicals. A few weeks after *A New Hope*,

Valance told his followers that he had a new mission for them -- one he would pay for himself. Their objective: Utterly destroy Anglebay Station. No salvage... and no survivors.

The mission unsettled even the hard cases that made up the *Kill Switch*'s crew. Anglebay Station was neutral in the Galactic Civil War, caring for any patients that came its way, even bounty hunters. But fear of their ruthless boss and greed for his credits kept the hunters silent, and the *Kill Switch* headed up the Hydian Way to the Telos system.

The *Kill Switch*'s first mate, Slssk the Hutlarian, was nearly as feared in some circles as the Hunter himself. When asked if his crew was tough enough to take on a certain foe, Valance liked to nod at Slssk, who would peel off his battle armor to display an orange-skinned torso criss-crossed with white scars and pitted with sucker marks. "Ten years as a gladiator on Loovria didn't kill my first mate," Valance would say. "What makes you think this target stands a chance?" One look at the Hunter's smile and the Hutlarian's blazing red eyes, and Valance usually had his contract.

Slssk was legendary, but tough Hutlarians aren't rare. Hutlar is a dim, chilly little world in the depths of the Mid Rim's Senex sector. For millennia, its natives have served as bodyguards and shock troops for the Senex and Juvex lords.

Mission 3: The Wrong Boy

During the Telos raid, Valance's henchmen overheard a patient babbling about his adventure with Han Solo, the Lepi smuggler Jaxxon, and a boy with a droid -- an apparent breakthrough in Valance's quest for the identity of the Death Star's destroyer. Valance's thugs ambushed Jaxxon on Nar Shaddaa, which led them to the Rimworld Aduba-3 and a showdown with Jaxxon, Amaiza Foxtrain and the villagers of Onacra. There, Valance discovered he'd found Jimm Doshun, not Luke Skywalker -- a mistake that almost proved fatal.

Mission 4: The Doom of Ultaar

Valance lost his crew on Aduba-3, but he managed to escape with his life and was soon back on the trail of the Death Star's destroyer. His investigations led him to a new target: a Rebel information-retrieval team secretly based in the jungles of Ultaar.

Mission 5: Showdown on Junction

The raid on Ultaar netted Valance no new information and a new enemy. Darth Vader discovered the Rebel outpost just days after Valance's raid, and learned of the cyborg hunter from a dying Rebel soldier.

Frustrated in his search, Valance traced Rebel supply lines and learned of the Imperial blockade of Yavin. He set up operations on the shadowport of Junction and waited there,

biding his time by collecting bounties on the likes of Marko Tyne, a Zygerrian slaver wanted on Thesme for depredations in nine of the sector's systems.

After five weeks, Valance's patience finally paid off: Luke Skywalker and C-3PO arrived on Junction seeking parts to repair a damaged R2-D2. When Valance arrived at Skinker's salvage yard, Luke dove inside the office, pushing C-3PO in front of him, then hustled the droid out the back door. After Valance burned his way in, the stage was set for his confrontation with Luke. But the encounter didn't go quite as Valance had imagined it.

Mission 6: Centares Endgame

C-3PO's willingness to sacrifice himself for his master awakened something in Valance the hunter had thought long gone: hope. Namely, the hope that the galaxy could be a better place where cyborgs aren't ostracized. But the hunter realized he was racing against Darth Vader for the identity of the Death Star's destroyer -- a secret Valance now determined to protect at all costs.

Valance's new quest led him to Tyler Lucian, a deserter who'd fled the Rebel base on Yavin 4 as the Death Star approached and was now hiding in a tower above the deadly acid waters of Centares' Rubyflame Lake. But Vader arrived just minutes after Valance, distracting the hunter long enough for Lucian to lock himself in the tower. There, the deserter watched an epic battle between the bounty hunter and the Lord of the Sith.

Viva Space Vegas! The History of the Marvelous Wheel

The Wheel

The mere mention of its name conjures images of luxury. Lights. Excess. And sin.

And money. Money by the starshipful.

In a galaxy spanning millions of systems, where corruption and dark ambitions run rampant, the depravities one might wish to sample are as limitless as space itself. From spice addiction and forbidden knowledge to indulgences of the flesh of any number of species — if there's a demand for something, then someone, somewhere, can supply it.

Among such varied vices, one constant throughout the galaxy is the love of gambling. Whether at Nar Shaddaa's sabacc tables, Umgul's blobstacle course, Coruscant's garbage pit races or Vorzyd V's Cosmic Chance boards, there is no end to the number of credits one can win — or lose — pursuing instant wealth. But of all the popular gambling havens, few have attained the notoriety of the Wheel. Its reputation for debauchery unparalleled, its

gladiatorial arenas the stuff of legend, the Wheel is known far and wide as *the* place to go for those looking to risk it all....

Wheeling and Dealing

The Wheel is a city-sized space station located in the Besh Gorgon System, out past Hapes in the Mid Rim. As its name implies, the station's main fuselage resembles a massive rotating ring, lined with nearly a hundred luxury docking piers. Two long spokes intersect at a bulbous promenade at the hub, each section containing a full battery of service droids programmed to attend to every need.

The luxury ports, reserved for the most favored of guests, are an amazing scientific achievement. Built by Bolzi Design & Transmogrification, a gifted Ugor architectural firm, the system uses a morphometric technology enabling the station's computer to analyze an approaching ship and alter a port's structure and cabling to match its particular needs. Literature circulated by the station's advertising gurus claims the ports can accommodate "any ship design known or unknown." Anyone living within a thousand light-years of the Wheel should be well familiar with its popular slogan: "Space may be freezing, but here the action's hot, so book your trip today — at the Wheel, where *no one* gets left out in the cold!"

Beyond the luxury docks, thousands of buoys dot the station's surface for general admission. Shuttles transport guests to their rooms — or, if they can't wait to drain their credit chips, directly to the sprawling sea of casinos lining the great ring. Gladiatorial arenas fill the central hub, in which warriors of countless species battle to the death for patrons' entertainment and wagering.

Throughout its long existence, the Wheel has survived empires and democracies alike, by remaining resolutely neutral in virtually all disputes. Built 52 years before the Battle of Naboo by Doffen Gaitag of Qiraash, the station enjoyed immediate success as one of the galaxy's premier gambling dens. Gaitag's first three successors — Count Vrescot, Kelek the Blue, and Dominic Raynor — each expanded the station's facilities, while also exploiting them for personal gain. While these eccentric personalities helped grow the Wheel's legend, their selfishness also helped demolish its reputation.

Skijid Vrescot, a cephalopoid J'feh crimelord and the appointed Count of Cheelit, purchased the station from Gaitag for the sole purpose of opening a vast distribution network of Tirefin spice throughout the Outer Rim Territories. The tentacled spice dealer renovated the station's recycling systems, which he used to refine the Tirefin for increased potency.

Spice-dealing, however, can be a most dangerous gamble, and Vrescot soon learned the price of losing to the wrong opponent. The rubbery crimelord's tenure at the Wheel proved

one of the shortest when he made the mistake of crossing the Glottalhib piratess Kliskud. Vrescot had promised Kliskud free reign to terrorize ships in the vicinity, in return for the firespitter's help in eliminating rival spice dealers. But when Kliskud's activities made travel so dangerous it scared away many high-stakes players, Vrescot abruptly ended their association. The affair left a bad taste in Vrescot's mouth — but not in that of Kliskud, who found the J'feh quite tasty, if a bit tough to chew.

As the Wheel Turns

Following Count Vrescot's death, the Republic seized the Wheel long enough to shut down the crimelord's spice operation. Kelek the Blue, a Tefaun banker also called Kelek the Insensate, purchased the Wheel and, as its third administrator, introduced the now infamous Big Game. With egalitarian disregard for species, gender or creed, this brutal competition featured gladiators from around the galaxy pummeling, maiming and goring one another to the concluding gasp and very last droplet of plasma.

While the Wheel's wealthiest patrons initially embraced the vicious spectacle, the staggering influx of the galaxy's basest scoundrels inevitably drove big spenders away. In the wake of reduced revenues, Kelek indebted herself to the InterGalactic Banking Clan, hoping its financial backing would help regain lost clientele. Ultimately, though, she failed to get out from under. When the Banking Clan called in its investment, Kelek was unable to make payment and was forced to sell her remaining shares to Tionesese business mogul (and widely reputed gangster) Dominic Raynor, owner of Raynor Mining Enterprises. He, in turn, siphoned off millions in Wheel profits during his tenure, to fund mining opportunities on Bepin, Ota and other worlds.

The Banking Clan could never prove Raynor's embezzlement, but the station survived the loss of credits due to its immense popularity. Raynor, a noted gambler, nearly doubled the number of casinos — many fixed in his favor, of course — and brought the station to new heights of prosperity. The Wheel regained its status as the preeminent gambling mecca, though Raynor's corruption was no less than that during Vrescot's spice-dealing days.

Eventually, Raynor amassed sufficient wealth to buy out the Banking Clan's shares — but prosperity breeds envy. Iaco Stark, Raynor's former business partner, had recently acquired the ancient *Jubilee Wheel* starport in the Bright Jewel Cluster, whose betting palaces now appeared distinctly "venerable" compared to Raynor's flourishing gambler's paradise. As such, the Wheel's fourth administrator found himself shellacked with a lawsuit from his bitter rival.

The enmity between the two businessmen went back to some unspecified incident in the Corporate Sector involving a Sith amulet, Zanibar cannibals and Stark's one-time girlfriend, holo-starlet Riva Denais (*still* reportedly missing). Stark's lawsuit against the Wheel claimed

5,073 counts of copyright infringement — mostly preposterous and unfounded — including the alleged theft of the *Jubilee's* ring design, exploiting a game of chance called the “Jubilee Wheel” and plagiarizing its congeneric appellative.

Determined to outfox his competitor, Raynor produced convenient proof that his station had been officially registered as the *Marvelous* Wheel by Administrator Gaitag, then counter-sued Stark, seeking damages for pain and suffering and emotional duress. But when Stark obtained representation from celebrity Qiraash attorney Qim “The Devourer” Delio — a.k.a. Qimberly *Gaitag*-Delio, granddaughter of the “Marvelous” Wheel’s founder — Raynor pawned the station off to Cody Sunn-Childe, who became the fifth administrator. Raynor went on to serve as administrator of Bepin’s Cloud City, which he ran with equal corruption.

Cody Sunn-Childe’s administration, and the dawn of the Clone Wars, brought greater intrigue and hazard to the Wheel. Sunn-Childe was a capitalist and Separatist sympathizer, hailing from the planet Jashwa, home to a Sullustan cousin-species. During his reign, Jedi Knights Quinlan Vos and Aayla Secura intercepted a Separatist data disk outlining a planned attack on Kamino. This information enabled the Republic to execute a calculated defense of the planet, while allowing the Kaminoans to transport vital cloning equipment, thereby preserving the Republic’s soldier works.

Sunn-Childe “stepped down” as administrator after a mere five years, shortly following the Republic’s demise, when Imperial troops conducted a hostile nationalization of the Wheel in a backroom deal made with Senator Simon Greyshade of Columex. In exchange for a large percentage of the gambling profits in Greyshade’s constituency, the newly formed Galactic Empire awarded the senator control of the station.

Disgusted at the moral turpitude of the Republic, the Separatists and the Empire all, Sunn-Childe became a radical freedom fighter. The Jashwik had violently resisted the Imperial takeover of the Wheel, and now the charismatic warlord embarked on a mission of uninhibited savagery against the new government. This earned him the designation “Enemy of the Empire,” and made him a folk hero to countless beings, including Socorran businessman Lando Calrissian, as well as Imperial resister Earnst Kamiel of the Justice Action Network. Sunn-Childe himself, however, abruptly gave up the fight as hopeless, disappearing to parts unknown.

Spin-Doctoring the Wheel

Ever the entrepreneur, Simon Greyshade increased Wheel profits many times over during his two decades as the sixth administrator. In fact, Greyshade was among the first to suggest the Republic generate income from gambling. Senator Greyshade’s bill called for Republic investment in new casinos throughout his sectors in the Commonality, in return

for the majority of the profits. While the galactic leisure industry was suffering record losses due to the Separatist Crisis, casinos were, on average, continuing to generate steady profits.

Many public figures, including Viceroy Nute Gunray of the Trade Federation, endorsed Greyshade's plan, claiming many would be more willing to try their hand at gambling than to entrust their money in a bank that might not be part of the Republic tomorrow. Others, however, such as Alderaan's Senator Bail Organa, vehemently disagreed. Though Greyshade's proposal met with skepticism and derision from other lawmakers, he weathered the negativity, convinced the idea would be accepted. His foresight paid off: Upon declaring himself Emperor, Palpatine called a private meeting with Greyshade to revisit his gambling proposal.

The deal that saw Greyshade installed as Wheel administrator was eminently profitable for all involved (save the ousted Cody Sunn-Childe), and the station was granted immunity-sphere status. This barred Imperial ships from docking and officers from interfering in the casinos' management. Greyshade, in turn, paid generous taxes to the Emperor. To avoid offending visiting Imperial dignitaries, Wheel policy molded itself to the Empire's anti-alien bias. To that end, Wheel Security operated under the assumption that all nonhuman species were guilty until proven innocent — providing plentiful fodder for the Big Game.

Full Circle

Greyshade launched the Wheel to new heights of success. His secret: Keep them entertained, and they'll keep you in credits. Only the best musicians, such as Tinial's Tway, The Emperor's New Clothes, Geggis Pek and Evar Orbus, played the Crimson Casino Lounge, and only the best warriors — Catumen, Wookiees, Bitthævrians and even the odd Dandelion Warrior — fought in the Big Game.

All good things must end, however, and the events heralding Greyshade's twilight began shortly after the Battle of Yavin. At that time, Rebel hero Luke Skywalker had fallen ill during a Jedi meditation exercise, prompting Princess Leia and swashbuckler Han Solo to violate an Imperial military containment zone to get him medical attention.

Solo had briefly encountered Greyshade during his days in the Imperial Academy, but held no real grudge against the man. Leia, on the other hand, was displeased about visiting the Wheel. Having previously suffered Greyshade's unwanted attentions while serving in the Imperial Senate, she knew him to be corrupt; what's more, he had twice asked her to marry him despite being double her age, and both times she'd spat out a disgusted rejection. Still, she had little choice if she wanted to save Luke's life.

En route, the Rebels ran afoul of Commander Zertik Strom, leader of the Imperial forces guarding the zone, who pursued them to the Wheel, ignoring its sanctuary status. As the Rebels stealthily searched there for medical aide, Stormtroopers raided the station, alarming its quasi-omniscient central computer. Master-Com, an ambulatory supercomputer, alerted Greyshade to Strom's arrival. The former senator was furious, remembering all too well the Imperial takeover that had ousted Sunn-Childe. Greyshade had *paid* his share of taxes and expected the Empire to uphold its side of the bargain. He threatened to notify the Emperor when Strom claimed the power to seize the station. Relenting, however, Greyshade demanded a Rebel be left alive for questioning. Strom agreed — but secretly ordered his men to leave none alive to expose the set-up.

Eventually, Strom's troops rounded up their quarries. Solo and his Wookiee co-pilot, Chewbacca, were forced to fight in the Big Game, while Leia was ushered to Greyshade's Executive Tower. Realizing Strom was effecting an Imperial takeover, Greyshade knew he'd be powerless to stop him. To his surprise, he found he cared less for the station than he did for Leia's survival, for her beauty still entranced him like no other's.

Luckily, Master-Com was not so powerless. Although Strom destroyed several of the supercomputer's droid bodies, Master-Com kept dispatching new bodies until finally subduing the officer. The automaton escorted Strom to an antechamber, where Greyshade agreed to an uneasy truce: He'd let the Empire have the Wheel if he could keep Leia. Though he knew she loathed him, and that this would end the station's neutrality, he couldn't bear to see her hurt.

Covertly, Wheel Security raided Strom's ship and found the stolen profits, which they moved to Greyshade's private yacht, *Spoilt Sport*. Meeting with the Rebels, Greyshade offered to let them go free if Leia accompanied him when he escaped. She accepted — but the escape never came to pass, as Strom revoked Greyshade's administrative authority and shot him in the chest. Releasing Leia, Greyshade unleashed a proton grenade, and the massive blast killed Strom, eradicating Greyshade (and, seemingly, Master-Com) in the process.

A Turn for the Worst

In the wake of Greyshade's death, Emperor Palpatine seized the Wheel, assigning a military overseer. Commander Mulchive Wermis, the Wheel's seventh administrator, shut down the station for two months while effecting repairs to the portions destroyed by the proton grenade. The gambling paradise eventually re-opened, and though many were reluctant to return with the Wheel under Imperial jurisdiction, the lure of the game eventually won out, and the Wheel continued turning a profit — but this time, *all* of it went to Palpatine (aside from what Wermis skimmed off the top).

Wermis, who served under Darth Vader, was not the bravest of men. Alternating between cowardice and incompetence on missions to the Cowl Crucible and Centares, the Imperial officer frequently left the Dark Lord in disgust. When Vader assigned him to station duty, the commander was relieved to serve out the remainder of his military career at a safe administrator's desk, accompanied by his Zeltron mistress, Malyssa Raventhorn. Wermis administered the Wheel for only a few years, during which time unknown saboteurs made life impossible for him with a plague of system-wide breakdowns, until the Besh Gorgon System was finally liberated by the Rebel Alliance's successor, the New Republic. Having grown obese and sedentary in his posting, he suffered a fatal heart attack upon hearing the news. Wermis' stolen credits were unaccounted for, though Raventhorn vanished on the same day as his death.

Wermis' forces were no match against the opposition, arrayed by General Lando Calrissian. Though some senators wanted to use the Wheel to generate profit for the military, most were glad to dispense with the station to avoid any public perception of corruption. To the surprise of many, Calrissian opted not to lobby for possession of the Wheel. He considered its liberation a means of honoring the memory of its one-time caretaker — and Lando's childhood hero — Cody Sunn-Childe. Instead, the general recommended turning control over to Master-Com, who'd been secretly frustrating Captain Wermis' administrative efforts. Thus, despite his synthetic nature, Master-Com became the Wheel's eighth administrator.

It was during the supercomputer's administration that the "Curse of Stark," the half-century-old legal dispute started by Iaco Stark and Dominic Raynor, was definitively resolved. After Stark was decollated in an industrial mishap, the rival *Jubilee Wheel* ultimately fell into the hands of Zambarti crimelord Big Bunji. He gambled on nearly taking it apart and heavily remodeling it with Hutt backing in the Pickerin system and towed it into orbit around Ord Mantell — only to be beset by extragalactic warriors called the Yuuzhan Vong. It was then that Master-Com extended the hydenock branch and sent half of the Wheel's private fleet to assist him. Despite the aid, however, the invaders pulverized Bunji's station into space flotsam. Sloppy journalism reports equated the disaster with the conquest of Master-Com's station, but the Wheel remained unbowed.

Master-Com's influence was felt throughout the next century. The station briefly came into the possession of an enigmatic elderly man, but was soon purchased by Biituian industrialist Dov Paploush. As the Wheel's tenth administrator, Paploush pumped credits into the station's overhaul but displayed surprisingly poor business acumen. When her incompetence got her killed by mercenaries sworn to the oath of the Bloody Bones, she had already nearly run the casino complex into the ground. By the time of the Sith's resurgence

and the rise of Darth Krayt's Empire, the Kel Dor head of Wheel Security, Pol Temm, took over the station, restoring it to a profitable commodity.

After living on the Wheel nearly all his life, Temm's first action as its eleventh administrator was to do away with the station's unsavory gladiatorial games, putting in place a strictly enforced ban on fighting and weapons, on threat of immediate expulsion — with or without one's spaceship. Unbeknownst to Temm, Nyna Calixte, head of intelligence for Krayt's Empire, successfully patched into the station's security vids so she could spy on activities there. Thus it was that she was able to locate bounty hunter Cade Skywalker, of the famed bloodline, whose capture the Sith had ordered.

Temm reportedly went out in a blaze of glory, defending the station in a waspish, aging *Defender*-class Star Destroyer against the Mandalorian Supremacists, making way for the station's twelfth administrator, Attatag Gosem. A beefy Gotal with suspected Sith affiliations, Gosem was the reigning champion of the Big Game three-years running — before turning to crime when Temm abolished the gladiatorial arenas. His triumphant return to the Wheel was viewed with marked suspicion, and the station fell into squalor and rust under his supervision, but many thanked the Maker that the ban on the infamous Big Game was revoked by Gosem.

Despite the galaxy's ever-changing politics, the Wheel continues to rake in credits after more than two centuries. And as each new government arises, as each new administrator assumes control, one constant remains true: For those who consider life a gamble, odds are they'll find whatever they seek at the Wheel.

SELECTED CHARACTER PROFILES

Shades of Grey: Senator Simon Greyshade

Simon Greyshade lived life in the hyperlane. A politician and a playboy, a casino czar and a speed hound, he liked things superficial and simple: hotrodding in top-of-the-line airspeeders, the company of the incontestably beautiful, a glass of fine Cassandran brandy or illegal Survapierre, the convenience of privilege and power. And all of these, Greyshade recognized, could be had for the right price.

Five years before acquiring the Wheel, Greyshade was a newly minted member of the Senate, following in the footsteps of his cousin, Jheramahd Greyshade. Representing Vorzyd V and other planets in the Commonality, Jheramahd had plummeted to his death after being thrown from his sky-high apartment on Coruscant. A murder investigation revealed that Venco Autem, an ex-Senate Guard whose military career had ended in scandal, had masterminded the killing. Thanks to the influence of another cousin, Diedrich

Greychade, no one proved Simon's role in the plot, and he inherited Jheramahd's title and belongings. For his part, Diedrich was later installed as moff of the Commonality.

Intent on ensuring that the Financial Reform Act would fail to pass the Senate, Venco had hired an assassin to take out Jheramahd, then helped Simon assume his cousin's vacated position. When Simon considered voting against Venco Autem's wishes, however, the younger Greychade became his next target. Only the timely assistance of Jedi Master Obi-Wan Kenobi and his Padawan, Anakin Skywalker, saved him from sharing Jheramahd's fate.

Although the Jedi were assigned to assist Simon Greychade, in truth he was no less corrupt than Jheramahd. Fully aware of Venco's intentions, Simon had accepted his help in assuming Jheramahd's Senate seat, barely shedding a tear for his late cousin. When Venco turned his sights on Simon, however, the senator wondered if it'd been wise to double-cross a known killer. The series of assassination attempts that followed proved his fears well-founded.

On the day of the Senate vote, a final assassination attempt proved to be the last. Disguising himself as a guard, Venco tried to kill Simon in his Senate seat. However, Venco's brother, Senate Guard Sagoro Autem, stopped him. Sagoro shot his would-be assassin brother, saving Simon's life.

During these events, Anakin chauffeured Simon in the senator's airspeeder. Two years later, Anakin "borrowed" Simon's custom-made Narglatch XJ-6 speeder to protect Senator Padmé Amidala from a similar assassination plot. Anakin returned the speeder without being seen, and Simon never learned who appropriated it. Meeting Anakin at a state dinner after the incident, the angry senator told him what had happened and vowed to find "the sleemo" who stole his baby. With a cough, Anakin responded that whoever it had been must have been talented not to have been caught.

I, Droid: Master-Com

Master-Com was a Czerka Corporation Master Control System, the latest in supercomputer technology. Overcoming the limitations of the immobile BRT series, as well as the documented mania of the obsolete G0-T0s, the state-of-the-art "Master-Com" adroitly performed all administrative needs and was capable of endorsing a parade of complementary droid bodies with its distinctive, pleasant personality, making for a far more agreeable interface with sentient co-workers.

The Wheel's Master-Com was integral to the station's construction from the start. A visionary, administrator Doffen Gaitag had understood that running his gambling utopia would require not only a partner that never slept but one he could wholeheartedly trust. The new Czerka supercomputer, with its bundle of droid bodies, proved to be the solution

Gaitag sought. Master-Com served each Wheel proprietor faithfully, learning from sentient beings and their business dealings as the years passed. The companionship of Simon Greyscale, however, provided the cognitive spark that changed everything.

Previous administrators had failed to fully employ Master-Com's varied capacities, but Greyscale utilized the supercomputer for nearly every aspect of operations. Master-Com controlled life-support and provided round-the-clock security and maintenance to patrons while simultaneously seeing to their transportation and comfort needs. The supercomputer was also outfitted with motion and sonic sensors and a self-destruct system — not to mention a top-of-the-line etiquette and protocol subroutine enabling it to serve as the perfect valet.

Equipped with so many bodies, Master-Com's amazing array of abilities allowed Greyscale to keep overhead low and profits high, and he soon realized he could run the entire facility with minimal staff. And yet, for all its importance to the former senator, Master-Com had nothing resembling a personal relationship with him — Greyscale considered it little more than a highly-refined tool. The arrival of Luke Skywalker and his fellow Rebels, including R2-D2 and C-3PO, however, changed that.

Fascinated by Luke's robotic companions and envious of the friendship they shared with their master, Master-Com found itself longing for the same relationship with Greyscale. Though he initially scorned the very idea, the administrator soon realized how much he relied on the droid's companionship, and when Master-Com sacrificed one of its bodies in an attempt — albeit futile — to protect him, Greyscale was touched, finally expressing friendship to the droid moments before dying.

Losing the only friend it had ever known profoundly affected Master-Com, who fell into what could only be classified as a very human-like depression. No longer content with merely following orders, and distrustful of Imperials thanks to its encounter with Strom, the droid refused to take another body and became irreconcilably withdrawn, leaving only its most basic systems online. This proved disastrous for the Wheel's new Imperial administrator, Captain Wermis, who could not keep the station operating smoothly. Soon, Master-Com found new purpose in frustrating the Imperial's agenda until finally the droid's sabotage culminated in the timely failure of the Wheel's deflector shields during a New Republic attack led by General Calrissian and his irregulars, "Lando's Commandos."

Thanks to Calrissian's influence, Master-Com became the Wheel's eighth administrator — the first artificial lifeform to hold the title — and served in this capacity for nearly a century. With each passing year, the supercomputer adopted more and more human mannerisms. Master-Com reportedly became a devoted Podracing enthusiast, partial to the Boonta's three days of celeritous decadence, as well as a connoisseur of music, from the melodious

Mystral Minstrels to Tinal's Tway and Geggis Pek. Associates, who claimed the gregarious droid could often be found "whistling" the tune to "A Speeder Bike Built for Two," declared it one of the finest *people* with whom they'd ever done business.

For a time, Master-Com's support was frequently sought by droids' rights activists — though they grew less enthusiastic as word spread of the automaton's affection for the Wheel's brutal Big Game, culminating in Master-Com's controversial open invitation to all mechanical combatants. At times, Master-Com even entertained the station's highest rollers in his private quarters. While offering a Kubaz cigarra and a snifter of Cassandran brandy (or even a spot of illegal Survapierre), the robotic administrator delighted the gamblers with remarkably true-to-life effigies, created using the station's morphometric capabilities.

Named "The Most Interesting Droid in the Galaxy!" in a *Popular Automaton* cover story, Master-Com achieved a celebrity which few organics ever do. But sometime during his 97th year as administrator, the droid mysteriously vanished. For weeks, the glowing lights of the Wheel ran dim and the sonorous clinking of jackpots went unheard. Then, just as unexpectedly, the station lit up again, and everything was as it was before — only now, the Wheel had its ninth and newest administrator, a charismatic gentleman known only as "Old Silver Eyes."

The grey-haired, mustachioed human radiated a captivatingly classical quality. Surprising to some, he proved just as genial as his robotic predecessor, if not more so, and seemed every bit as alert and proficient. None knew where Old Silver Eyes had come from, nor what had become of the much-respected Master-Com...but it sometimes felt as if the droid had never left. Some said there was almost a superhuman efficiency to Silver Eyes' managerial method, and under his tenure, Wheel profits soared to an all-time high as patrons — and perhaps the station itself — pulsed with elation. A ludicrous rumor emerged that one of Master-Com's droid bodies had last been spotted piloting Greyshade's yacht, *Spoilt Sport*, toward a so-called "Droid World." Whenever confronted about Master-Com's disappearance, though, the charming Silver Eyes always turned up his hands and simply smiled.

Despite his apparent age, it came as something of a shock when, after three booming years as the Wheel's administrator, Old Silver Eyes closed his ocular receptors one ordinary night and passed to the Great Beyond. And as they had just prior to his appearance, all Wheel systems deactivated without warning once more.

When Biituian entrepreneur Dov Paploush acquired the station soon thereafter, she found that the Czerka Master Control System had been seemingly disconnected. With a shrug, an

indifferent Paploush gutted the outdated Master-Com and replaced it with the most modern available technology.

To Steal the Wheel: Commander Zertik Strom

For many Imperial officers, serving the Empire is a matter of pride and honor. It represents adherence to something larger than themselves, something grand and strong — the solidity and glory of the New Order.

Not so for Zertik Strom.

For this well-muscled, follicly challenged officer, Imperial service was entirely about power — specifically, his own. Commanding a fleet of warships led by the *Enforcement*, a *Pursuit*-class light cruiser, Strom yearned for more. The eldest son of Daschua's military governor, Strom firmly believed true power came not from within, but from without, and that for others to respect him, he must ever move upward and forward in his career.

Strom first made a name for himself as a lieutenant aboard the *Marshall Awe*, when he single-handedly decimated a rebellion among the Poporov merchants of Armstiss. Taking a blaster bolt intended for his commander, Captain Strayit, Strom had steadfastly ignored the pain and launched himself at the Poporov resistance leader, shoving a thermal detonator down the man's pants and tossing him off a cliff onto his followers. The resultant blast took out half the merchant shops in the district, but the desired effect was achieved — nearly all of the rioters were killed, and those few who survived were so shaken that they hid their rebellious sentiments thereafter.

For his actions, Strom was promoted to first officer of the *Peacehawk*, under General Ulric Tagge. He served Tagge brilliantly, and aside from a notation in his file about having a bit too much ambition for his own good, he excelled, becoming one of the youngest men ever to command an entire fleet of patrol ships.

Had he taken Tagge's observation to heart, Strom just might have lived long enough to enjoy the prestige that went along with the distinction. Alas, he did not. In attempting to fleece funds from Tagge's family business while commandeering Simon Greyshade's station for his own personal glory, Strom brought about his own demise, proving once more what every gambler knows — that no matter how much the game may be going in one's favor, it can all end abruptly...with just one bad turn of the Wheel.

Imperial alert transmitted after the Battle of Yavin

The Imperial Navy is searching for a CEC YT-1300 light freighter named the *Millennium Falcon*. According to data gathered from Mos Eisley Spaceport on the planet Tatooine, the *Millennium Falcon* is owned and operated by a Corellian smuggler and former Imperial pilot, Han Solo, and his partner Chewbacca, a Wookiee. The *Millennium Falcon* appears unremarkable but has been illegally modified for increased shield power and speed, and carries military-grade weapons. Imperial authorities most recently sighted the ship at Monastery and Ord Mantell.

Han Solo and Chewbacca are associates of the Rebel Alliance, and are wanted for the following crimes against the Empire:

- Liberation of a known criminal, Princess Leia Organa of Alderaan
- Direct involvement in armed revolt against the Empire
- High treason
- Espionage
- Conspiracy
- Destruction of Imperial property

Han Solo and Chewbacca are considered extremely dangerous. The Empire is offering a bounty of 300,000 credits for their capture. The bounty is for live capture only. The Empire will not be held responsible for any injuries or property loss arising from the attempted apprehension of these notorious criminals.

Anyone with information about the whereabouts of the *Millennium Falcon* and her crew should contact the nearest branch of the Imperial Intelligence Office.

You Never Can Tell

"... yeah, I swore I'd never risk running up against Zaglis and his NFP goons again — not enough profit margin in it — but the way it happened was like this ...

"Cyrstas Eloinie, the daughter of Darred Eloinie, CEO of Eloinie Petro-Munitions on Zaraksander, she finds herself in the wrong place at the wrong time. The Neo-Fundamentalist Phlangites who nabbed her had no way of knowing she was demonstrating *for* their side during that Peaceful Dawn Rally! They snatched her right and proper, no fuss, no muss, and the next thing he knows, old Darred is being hit up for 100,000 credits and a munitions factory on the southern continent. Now it seems that he didn't want to part with either one, but having his 18-year-old daughter all shot up wouldn't make for a good corporate image! So, the next thing I know, one of his pet flunkies comes round with 30,000 credits tucked in his pocket. Three hours later, I'm back in the Floor desert, going after the same bunch I'd just escaped from after bringing in their Supreme Leader ... yesterday! And the really lousy part of it all is that they know I'm coming and they're ready for me. Now, I ask you, is this a crazy way to make a living or what ..."

— Extract from Valken Gresh,
Great Hunts I've Lived To Tell About

Makin' It Happen

"Hey, Moxin, sweetheart, baby! How's the hunt? Hey, I just got the receipts on that Tellas Lordin job you brought in and let me be the first to say that was a smooth op — I mean *smoooooth* like a cloudsnake's carapace. Really went far to impress Prefect Adrona, I can tell you."

"Listen Moxi", I got her sweetness to extend the renewal of your Sector Permit for another year for only another 300 credits — can you believe it? Yeah, she really grav'd on that case of Hestrian wine you gave me ... sure, I know that was a gift just between you and me, but hey, no sacrifice is too good for my main man, 'ya know what I mean?"

"... Moxi", I got a good deal on some LAACDocs if you feel like pickin' up some loose change over in Demetras Sector. Sure, I know it's a bit of a hop, but I got this guy on Bellis IV who has a supply transport and he owes me a favor; one comm and I can fix it up. I figure you can pocket a few creds and then resupply at no cost, be back here in five days, and we split the take down the middle."

"... I heard from Gamorrean Interstellar. If you're still interested, they'll sell us the min-

ing rights on Quiberon V for a streak'in 500,000, 10 percent down and we neg them for the rest over 10 standard. Thanks. Hey do I come through for 'ya or what?"

"Before I forget. I found out that Beyla Rus has a lodge planned on the far side of Jweab VII. If you could find your way clear to be in the vicinity in say, five days, I know a little lady who plans to be meeting your acquaintance just about that time ... hey, do I ask you about *your* sources?"

"Anyway, no we don't have a bounty on him, but I know this guy over in Vex City who'll ship him back to Seswenna Sector for next to nothing and I figure we can get 10,000 for him if you're interested. You know, underground stuff. Well, think about it and let me know ..."

"Yeah, listen, it's been sweet, but I got another vid comin' in. Think about that Bellis IV thing and let me know. 'Til later, and watch your back. Can't let one of my best guys get himself into trouble, you know?"

"... Hey! Bobal Buddy, baby ..."

— Extract of conversation recorded from the
offices of Minas Derel, Licensed Expeditior,
Othon City, Pirin, Locris Sector

Almost Had 'Im

"We call Renlo old 'Solo's Bane'! Seems that he marched in here last year and announced to all and sundry that he was going to be the one to capture the infamous Han Solo. Seems he spent his last credit on outfitting his ship with all the latest gear—the best tech credits could buy, including a few secret 'black box' type thingamajigs to hear him tell it. Oh, and he went and found himself a handful of private instructors to, according to him, *reeeally* give him an edge, so to speak. So he buys a full night's drinks for everyone and off he goes.

"Fifteen months later, he's back with 'nay but the torn and bloodied tunic on his back. He'd lost his ship, gotten all his pretty toys

smashed up one by one, and he found his 'edge' wasn't quite as keen as he thought it was. That's him over in the corner, sweeping up glass and mutterin' to himself, 'Almost had 'im,' over and over again, night and day. Poor old Renlo. Poor stupid Renlo.

"Technology doesn't make a hunter. It's brains, and guts, and the willingness to spill some of both—yours and the other guy's—that does it. Start with those commodities and, with a little luck and a lot of common sense, you won't overmatch yourself and wind up like old Solo's Bane!"

— Conversation with an anonymous hunter,
"Arc of Fire" Bar & Grill, Selenius VII

Rebel Privateers

To: Moff Gergris, Halthor Sector Command

From: Governor Thanis, Noonar

Regarding: Increase in Piracy

I absolutely must insist on greater Imperial Fleet presence in the Noonian system. An alarming number of pirates has recently been plaguing merchant vessels, particularly those hauling cargoes for Nebula Consumables.

The Noonian system has several large food processing facilities where Nebula Consumables products are grown, synthesized and packaged. The pirates are intercepting 25 percent of all foodstuffs being shipped out of the system. If Nebula Consumables is to continue to supply the Imperial Army with foodstuffs, it will need more protection. I do not have the resources to regularly escort vessels to and from hyperspace jump points, and I certainly do not have the ships to seek out and destroy these pirates.

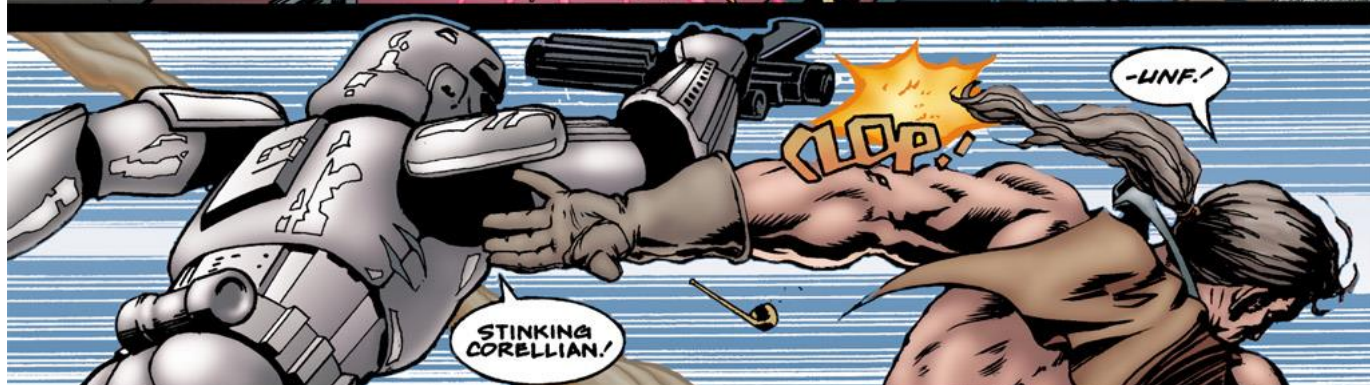
On perhaps a related note, General Kozar informed me that his men found an abundance of Nebula Consumables products when he shut down the Rebel base on Movris. If the lot numbers on those foodstuffs match the lots from ships hit by pirates in this system, these pirates might be privateers encouraged and possibly financed by the Rebellion.

I await your reply, and more Imperial Fleet support.

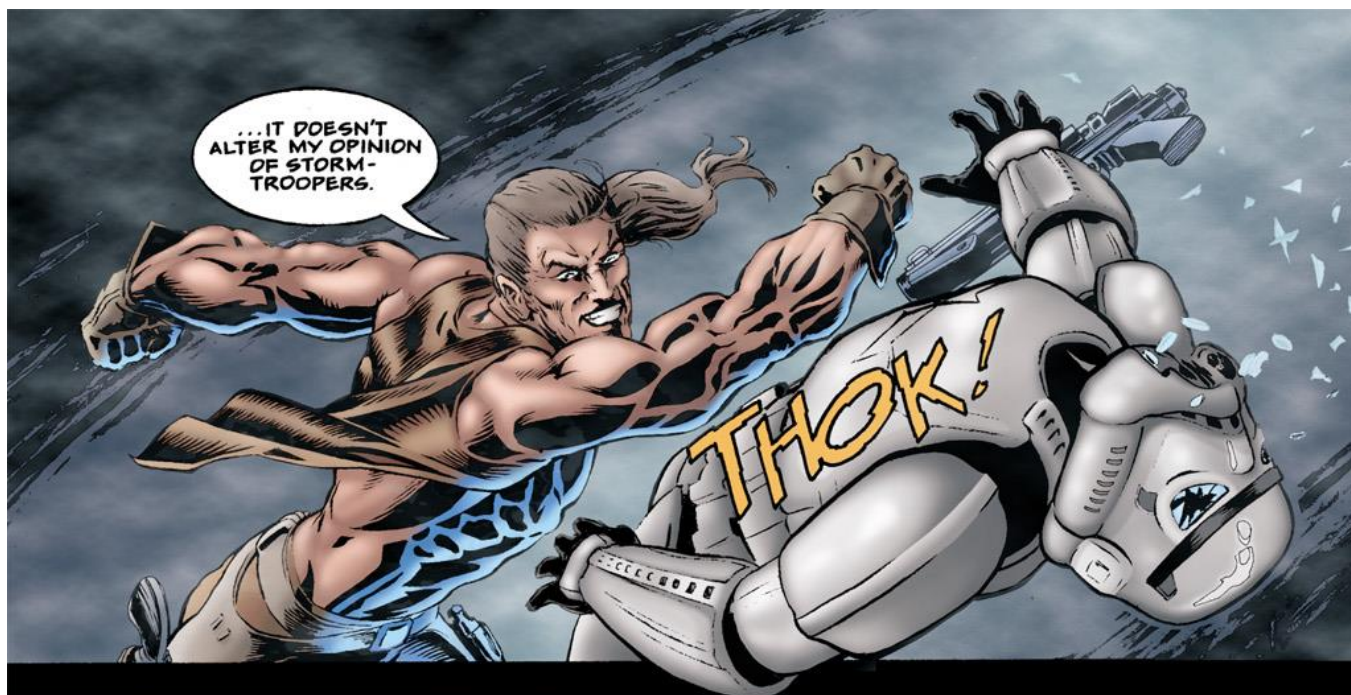
Governor Trophan Thanis, Noonar

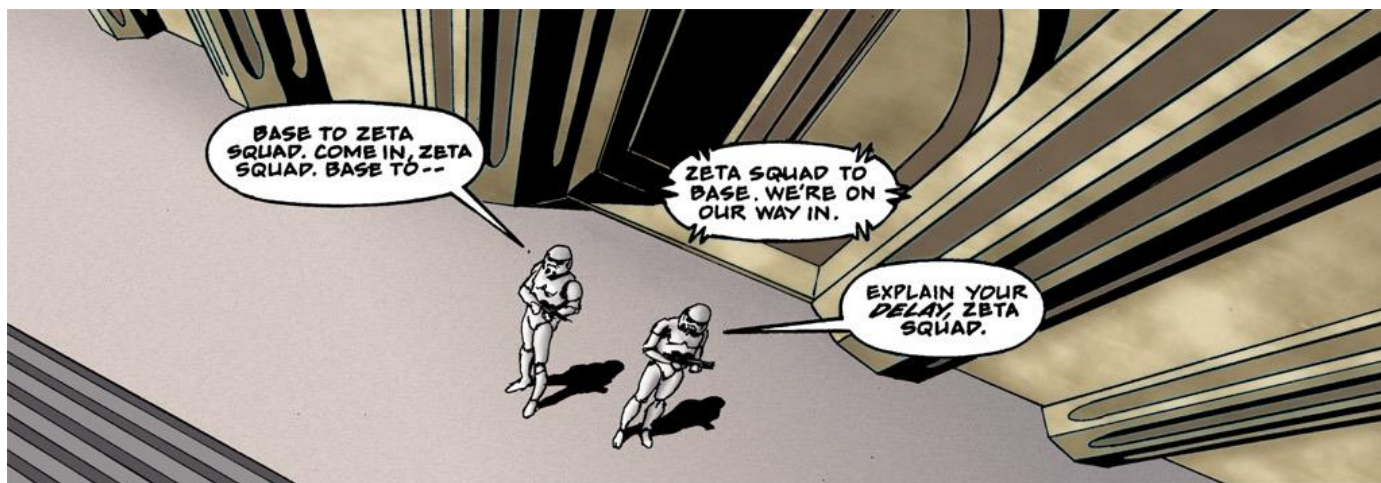
Shadow Stalker

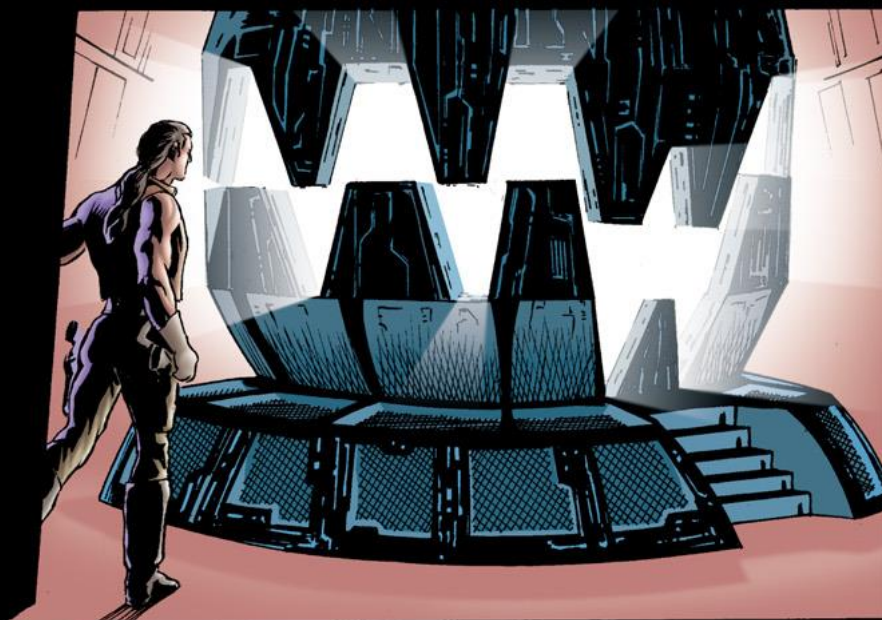










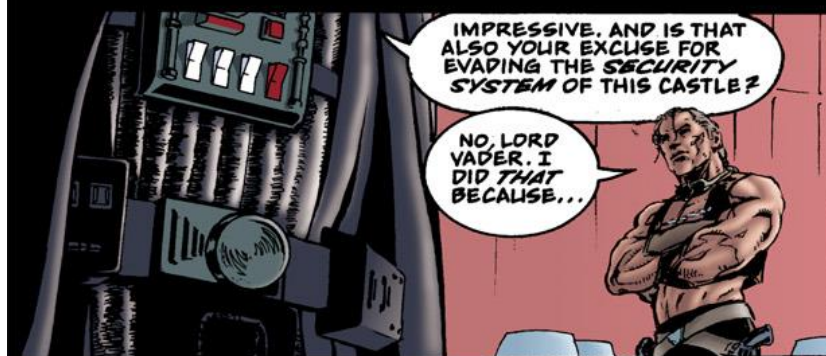




LORD VADER.

YOU'RE LATE.

MY ESCORTS
GOT LOST.



IMPRESSIVE. AND IS THAT
ALSO YOUR EXCUSE FOR
EVADING THE SECURITY
SYSTEM OF THIS CASTLE?

NO, LORD
VADER. I
DID THAT
BECAUSE...



I COULD.



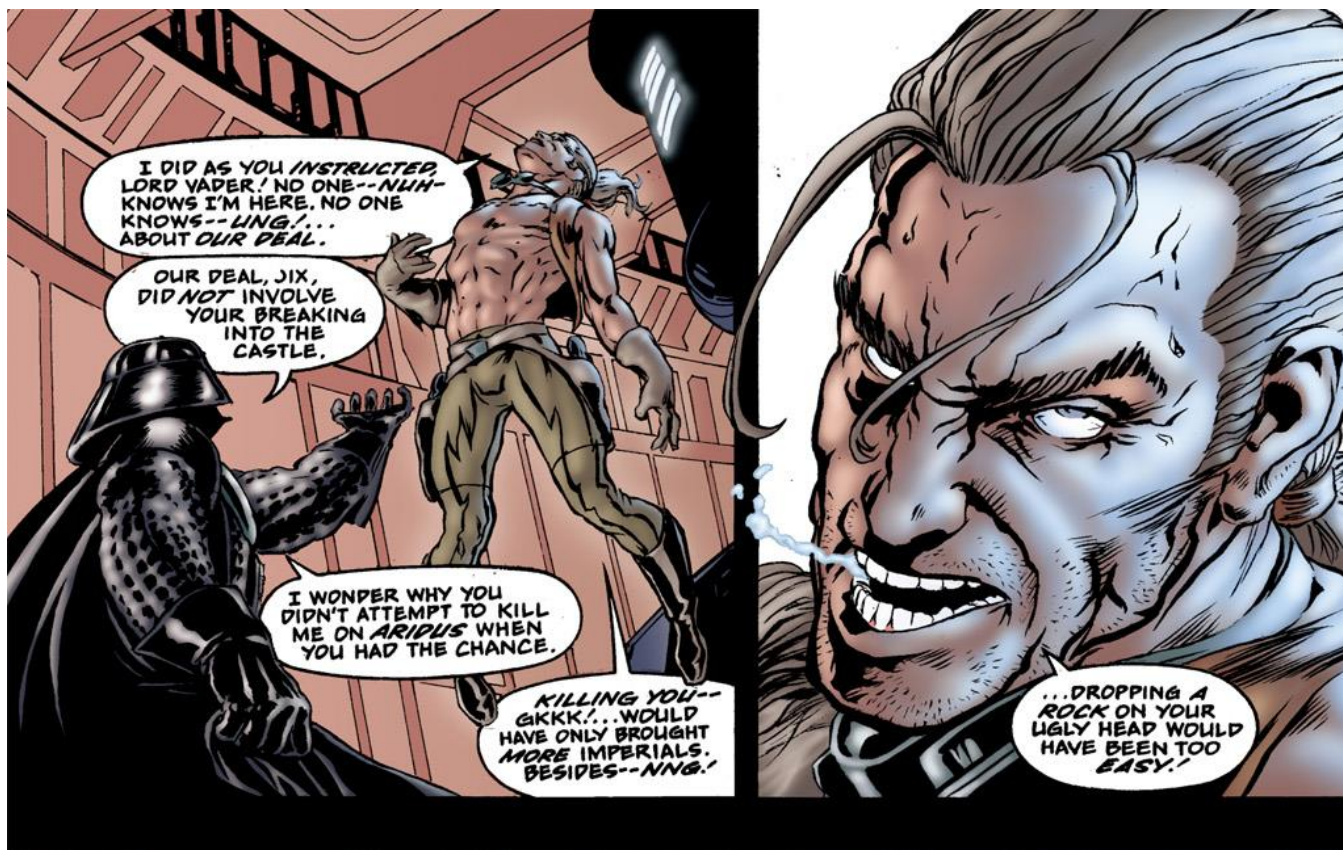
I SEE.

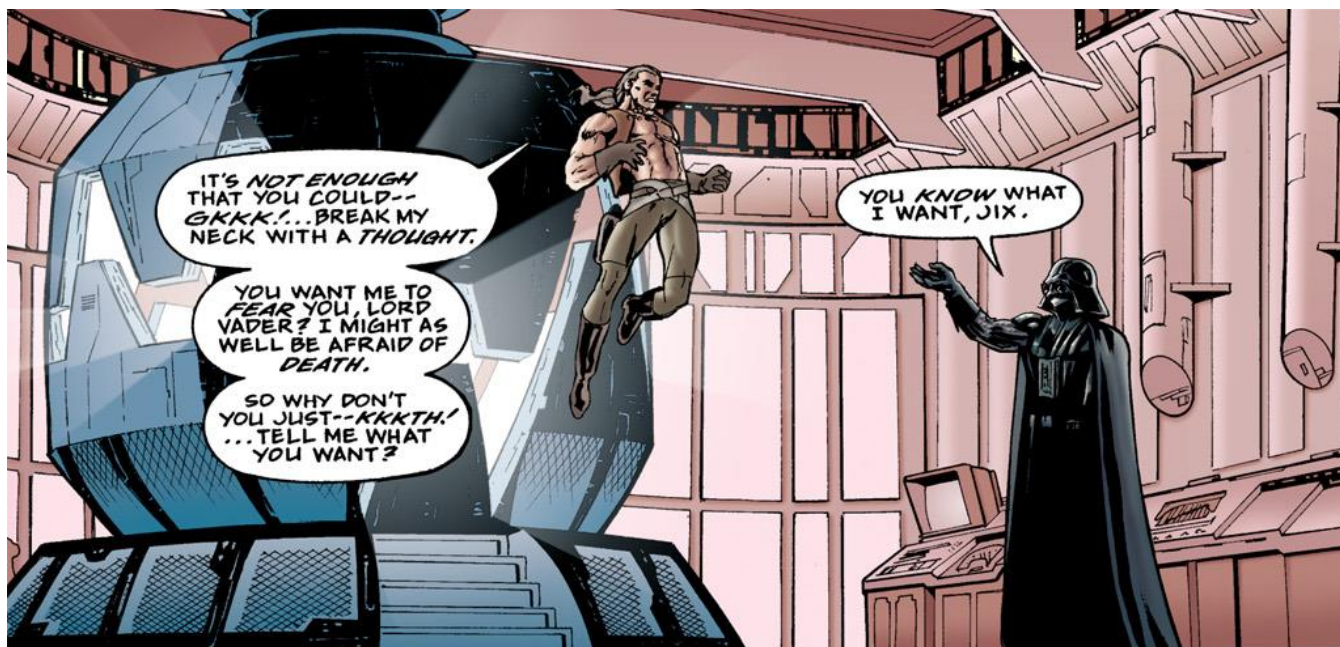
SO IT'S YOUR
SPECIAL ABILITIES
THAT SHOULD BE
CREDITED.

I SUPPOSE
YOU THINK ONE'S
ABILITIES ARE
GROUNDLESS...



...UNLESS
THEY ARE
USED!





IT'S NOT ENOUGH THAT YOU COULD--
GKKK!... BREAK MY NECK WITH A THOUGHT.

YOU WANT ME TO FEAR YOU, LORD VADER? I MIGHT AS WELL BE AFRAID OF DEATH.

SO WHY DON'T YOU JUST--KKKTH!... TELL ME WHAT YOU WANT?

YOU KNOW WHAT I WANT, JIX.



I WANT YOU TO KILL SOMEONE.

UNH!

I HAVE LEARNED FROM AN INFORMANT THAT IMPERIAL GOVERNOR TORLOCK ON CORULAG PLANS TO DEFECT TO THE REBEL ALLIANCE. THE INFORMANT WAS INSTRUCTED NOT TO ACT FURTHER IN THIS MATTER.

TORLOCK MUST BE ELIMINATED, BUT HIS DEATH WILL SERVE OUR PROPAGANDA MACHINE.

THE EMPIRE'S HAND MUST REMAIN INVISIBLE. IT IS ESSENTIAL THAT THE CITIZENS OF CORULAG BELIEVE THAT THE GOVERNOR WAS ASSASSINATED BY REBELS.

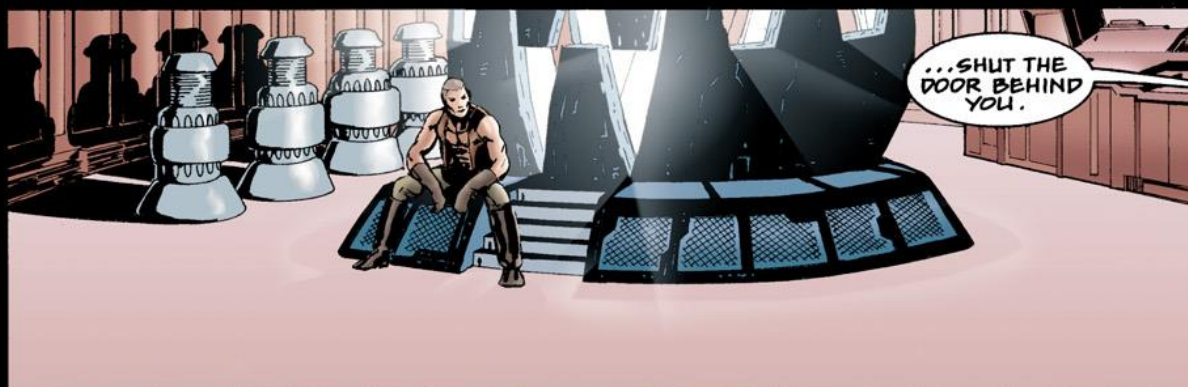
AS YOU ESTABLISHED OUR DEAL, JIX, I DON'T BELIEVE I NEED TO REMIND YOU OF THE CONSEQUENCES OF FAILURE.

SURE. HOW DO I GET TO CORULAG?

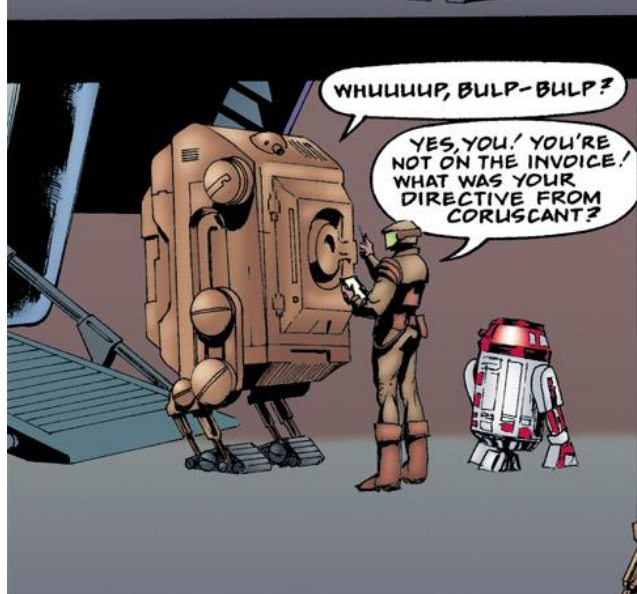
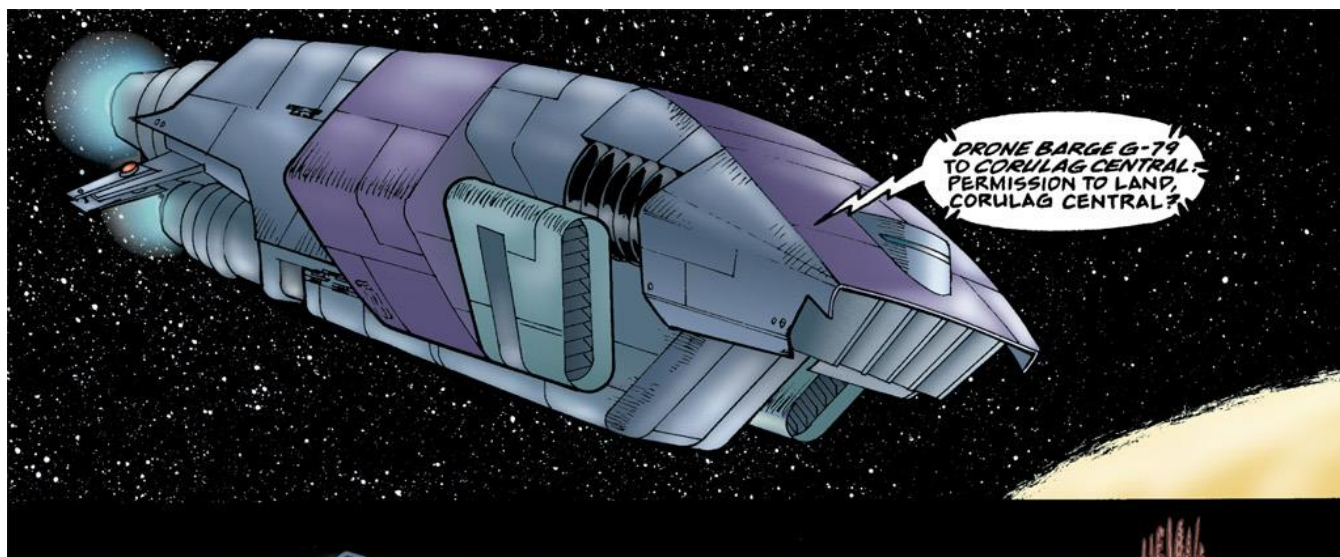
DRONE BARGE G-79 AT CORUSCANT PORT AUTHORITY. AND JIX?

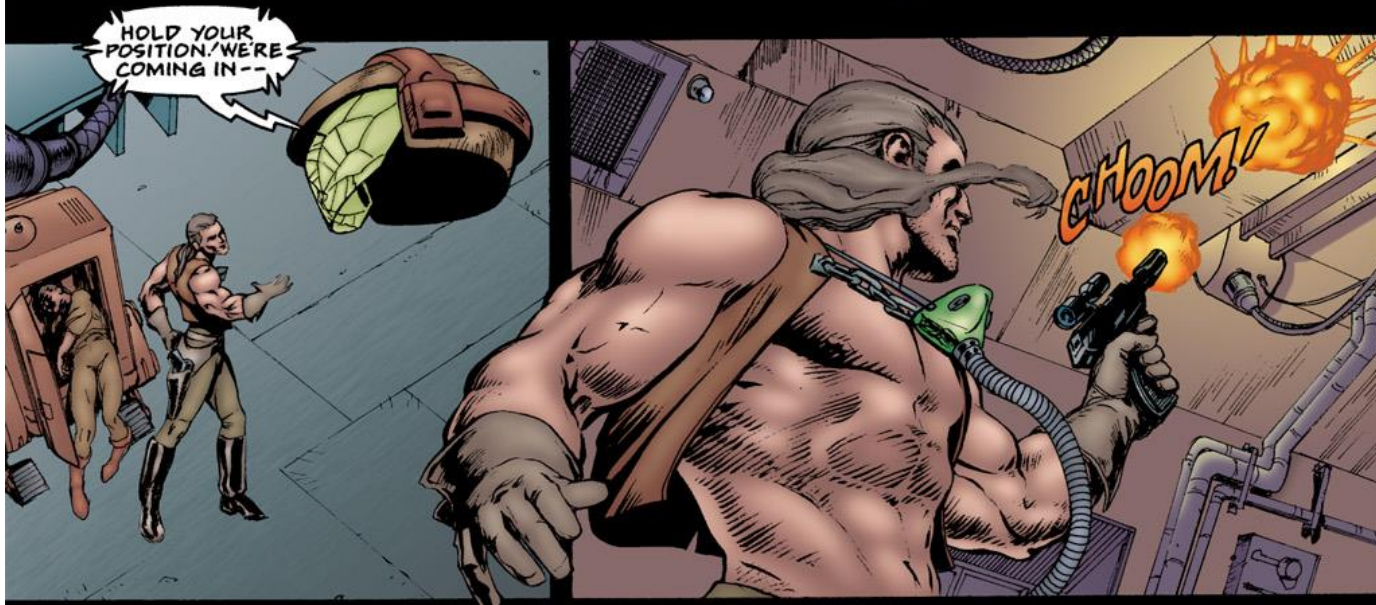
YES, LORD VADER?

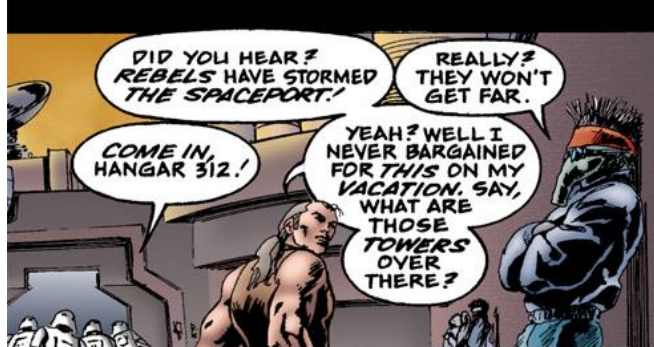
WHEN YOU LEAVE MY CASTLE...



...SHUT THE DOOR BEHIND YOU.



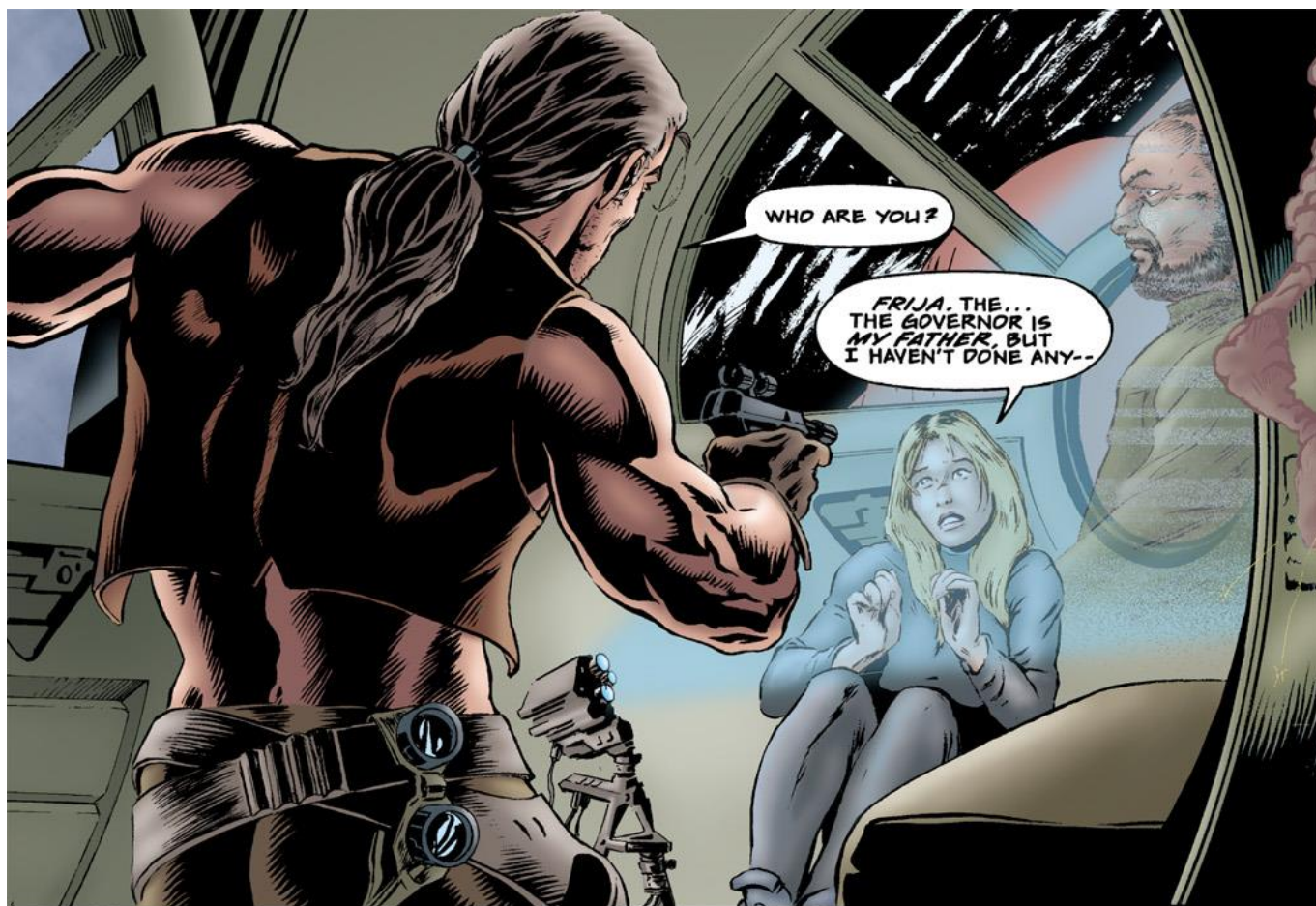














YOU--YOU DESTROYED THE HOLOPROJECTOR!

EVERYONE SEEMS TO WANT YOUR FATHER DEAD, FRIJA. STANDING NEXT TO A HOLOGRAM OF A HUMAN TARGET IS SOMETHING I DON'T NEED.

WHAT I WANT ARE SOME ANSWERS. WHERE'S YOUR FATHER?

I... I DON'T KNOW. HE LEFT FOR A MEETING YESTERDAY. THE SENTRIES NOTED HIS RETURN LAST NIGHT, BUT I NEVER HEARD HIM ARRIVE. THIS SPEEDER ARRIVED JUST MINUTES AGO. THE DRIVER TOLD ME THAT MY FATHER IS SUSPECTED OF DESERTION, AND THAT I'M WANTED FOR... QUESTIONING. OH--!

WHAT AM I DOING? YOU WANT TO KILL MY FATHER, TOO!

I'M CONSIDERING IT. WHY WAS THERE A HOLOGRAM OF HIM IN THE SPEEDER? COME ON! TALK!

THE DRIVER SAID THAT IT WAS FOR SECURITY PURPOSES. UNTIL THEY LOCATE HIM, THEY WANTED TO MAINTAIN MY FATHER'S PRESENCE. THE HOLOGRAM WAS TO DECEIVE THE SENTRIES.

THEY PUT ME IN THE SPEEDER, THEN PUT THESE MANACLES ON ME.

THOSE WEREN'T REBELS, UNLESS REBELS STARTED WEARING BLACK SUN TATTOOS.

IT WASN'T UNTIL THEN...

...I REALIZED I WAS BEING ARRESTED, TOO!

AND WHEN THE REBELS ATTACKED, I--



YOUR ESCORTS WERE ALSO IMPOSTORS.

THE THREE SO-CALLED STORMTROOPERS AT THE STERN NEVER EVEN TOOK THEIR BLASTERS OFF SAFETY! LOUSY AMATEURS.

I... I DON'T UNDERSTAND ANY OF THIS. WHO WERE ALL THESE MEN? AND WHO ARE YOU? A REBEL? AN ASSASSIN? AN... AN IMPERIAL SPY?

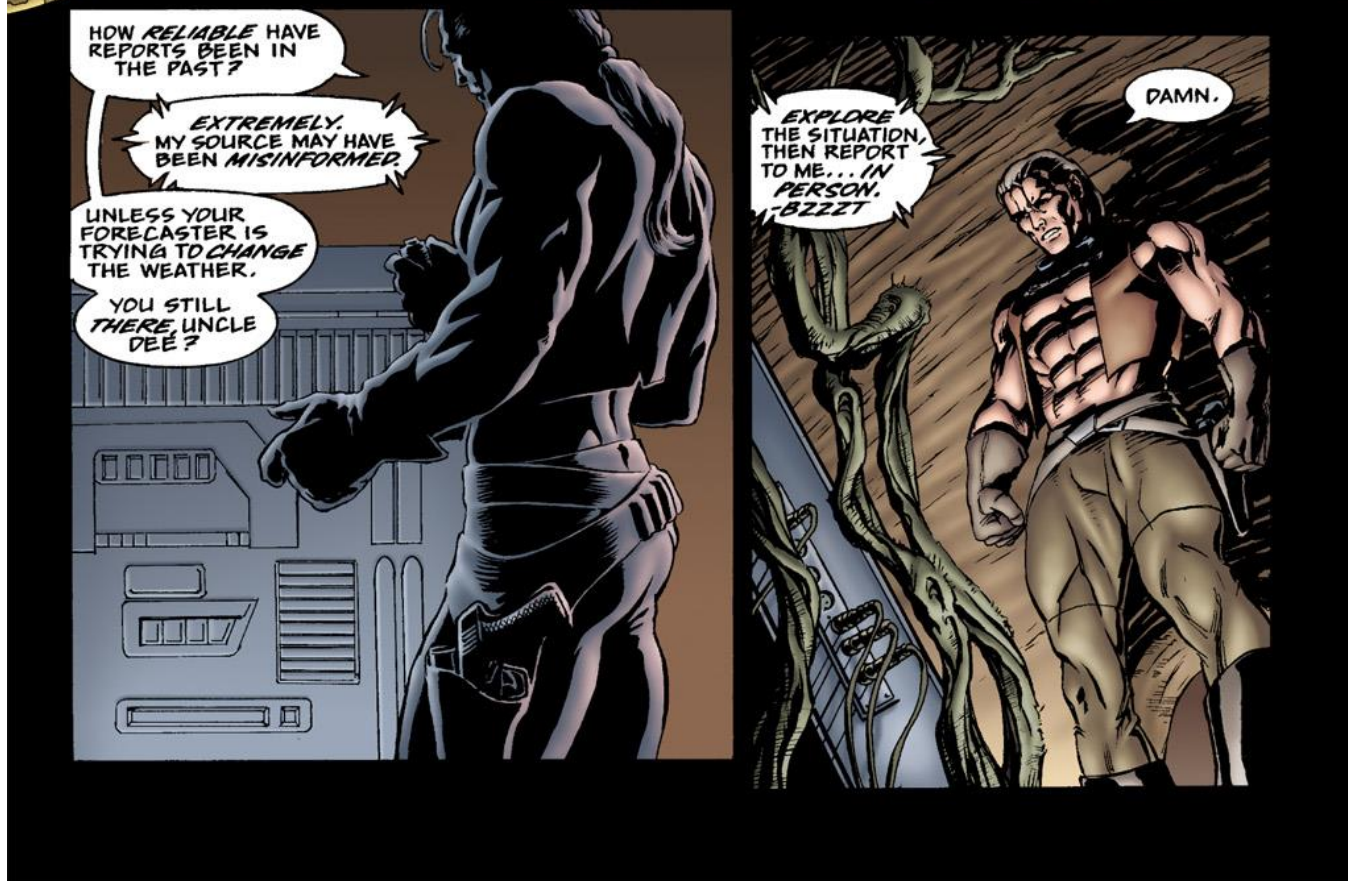
RIGHT NOW, LADY, I'M ABOUT THE ONLY THING IN THE GALAXY THAT'S KEEPING YOU ALIVE.

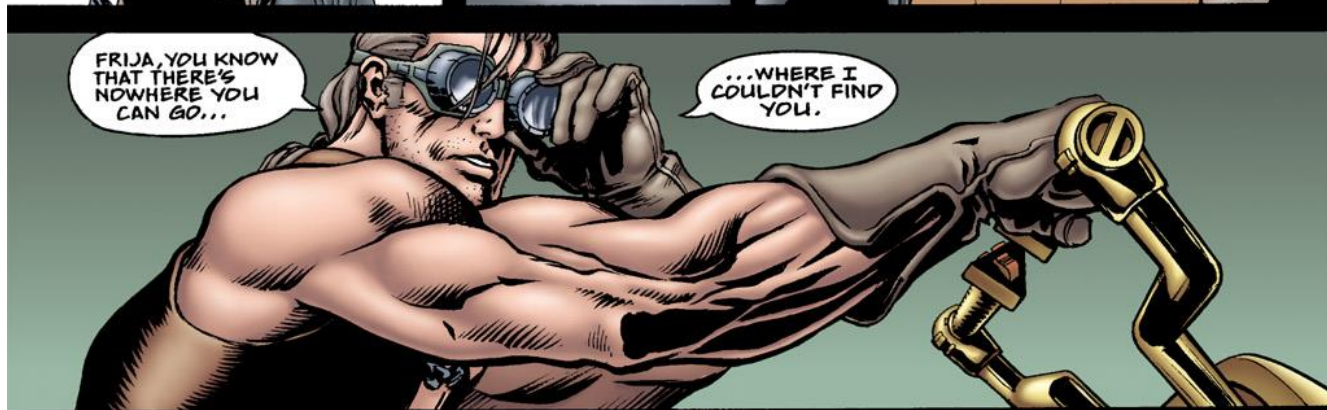
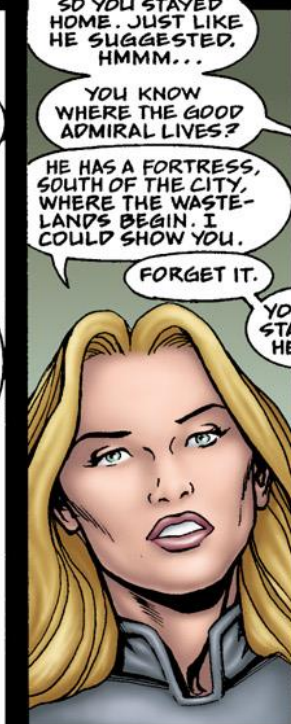
OW! WHERE ARE YOU T-TAKING ME?

I'VE GOT TO CALL SOMEBODY...

...LONG DISTANCE.













ONE WRONG MOVE, AND YOU'LL DIE.

YOU ACTIVATED AN ALARM WHEN YOU ENTERED MY WEAPON GALLERY. I ONLY LET YOU GET THIS FAR TO SEE HOW GOOD YOU ARE.

ADMIRAL DROON, I PRESUME?

I *KNEW* I SHOULD HAVE TRIED THE FRONT DOOR...



PUT YOUR HANDS OVER YOUR HEAD.

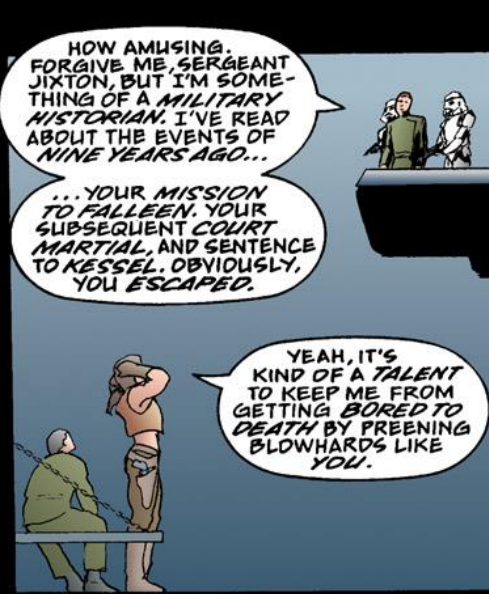
THE ALARM ACTIVATED MY COMPUTER, WHICH HAD SOME DIFFICULTY IDENTIFYING YOU.

I SUPPOSE I SHOULD BE IMPRESSED. YOU'RE A LIVING LEGEND...



...GUNNERY SERGEANT WRENGA JIXTON.

SO YOU KNOW MY NAME? YOU KNOW, NOW I'LL HAVE TO KILL YOU.



HOW AMUSING. FORGIVE ME, SERGEANT JIXTON, BUT I'M SOMETHING OF A MILITARY HISTORIAN. I'VE READ ABOUT THE EVENTS OF NINE YEARS AGO...

...YOUR MISSION TO FALLEEN. YOUR SUBSEQUENT COURT MARTIAL, AND SENTENCE TO KESSEL. OBVIOUSLY, YOU ESCAPED.

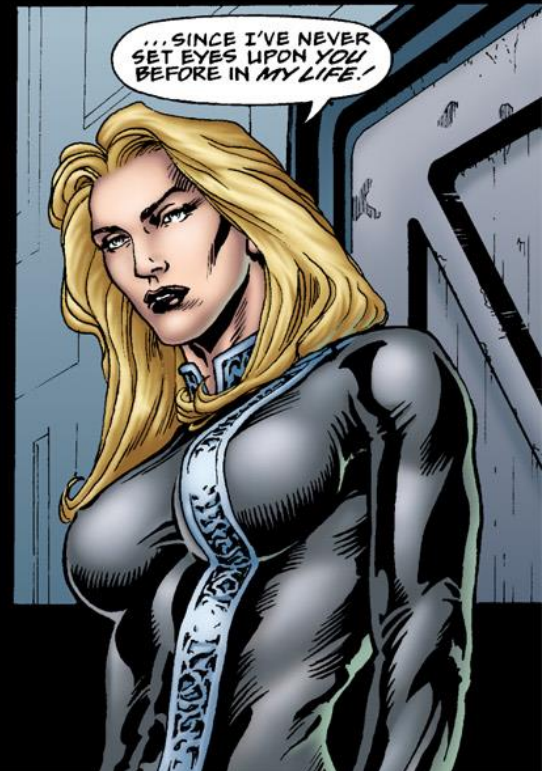
YEAH, IT'S KIND OF A TALENT TO KEEP ME FROM GETTING BORED TO DEATH BY PREENING BLOWHARDS LIKE YOU.



THE NEXT SHOT WILL KILL YOU, JIXTON. WHY DID YOU COME TO MY FORTRESS?

GOVERNOR TORLOCK'S DAUGHTER, FRIJA... SAID SHE'D PAY ME IF I COULD LOCATE HER FATHER.

THAT'S MOST UNLIKELY, SERGEANT...



... SINCE I'VE NEVER SET EYES UPON YOU BEFORE IN MY LIFE!









GOVERNOR TORLOCK BELIEVED THAT THE REBELS WOULD SOON ATTACK CORULAG. HE STRENGTHENED DEFENSES, BUT ALSO PREPARED AN ESCAPE ROUTE.

IN SECRET, HE HAD IMPERIAL TECHNICIANS CONSTRUCT HUMAN REPLICA DROIDS-OF HIMSELF AND AND HIS DAUGHTER-AS DECOYS FOR THE REBELS. TORLOCK'S OWN DAUGHTER KNEW NOTHING OF THIS.

SOMEHOW, THE GOVERNOR DISCOVERED THAT HIS DAUGHTER AND ADMIRAL DROON HAD SCHEMED TO INCRIMINATE HIM AS A TRAITOR TO THE EMPIRE.

NO LONGER TRUSTING ANYONE, TORLOCK FLED CORULAG, BUT NOT BEFORE HE ACTIVATED... ME, AND FRIJA.

DROON'S MEN BROUGHT ME HERE, TO THIS FORTRESS, AND SOON REALIZED... WHAT I AM. THEY... THEY SEARCHED MY MEMORY AND FOUND... MY DAUGHTER.

THEY'RE DEAD...

DROON SENT MEN TO CAPTURE FRIJA, AND KEPT ME HERE SO I COULDN'T WARN HER. THEY PLANNED ON USING A HOLOGRAM OF ME TO GET BY TORLOCK'S SENTRIES, BUT I FEAR THEY--

...AND YOUR DAUGHTER IS FINE.

HAHAHA. A MISSING GOVERNOR WOULD ONLY HAVE DRAWN AN INVESTIGATION, SO ADMIRAL DROON MADE IT APPEAR THAT TORLOCK WAS STILL ON CORULAG.

DROON AND VADER HAD THE SAME IDEA: KILL TORLOCK, BUT MAKE IT LOOK LIKE A REBEL STRIKE. THE KILL WAS MEANT TO BE SO MESSY THAT NO ONE WOULD EXPECT TO FIND TORLOCK'S BODY.

AND DROON WOULD TAKE THE GOVERNOR'S SEAT.

PRETTY WILD.

THIS LOOKS PROMISING.

WHAT IS IT?

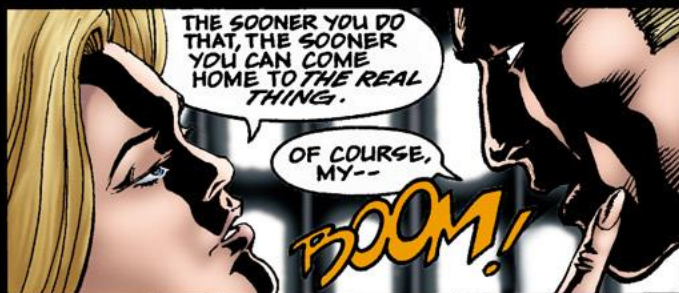
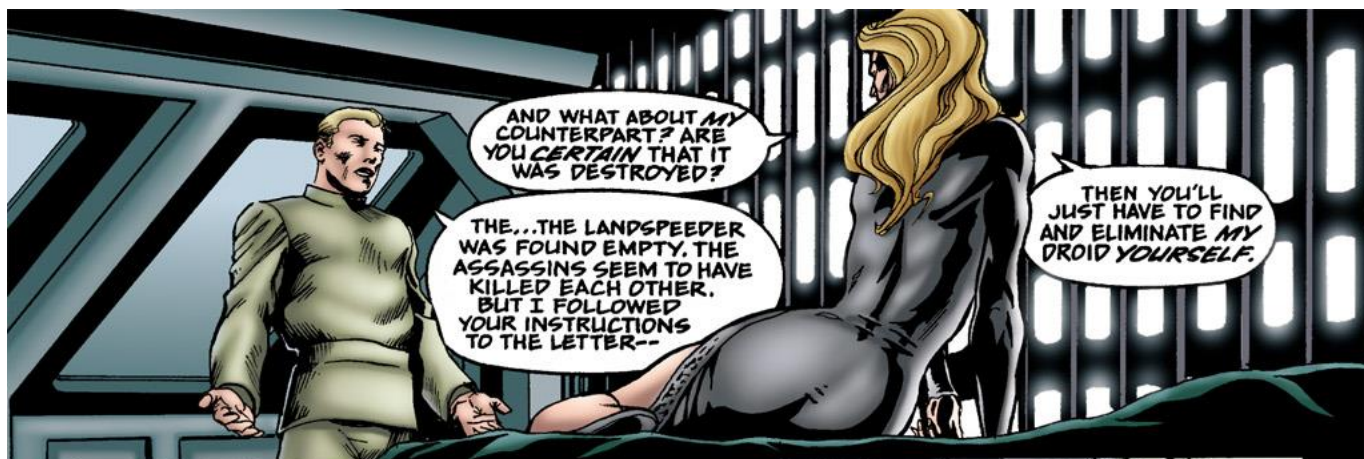
IF WE'RE STILL UNDER DROON'S FORTRESS...

"...IT MAY BE A WAY INSIDE."

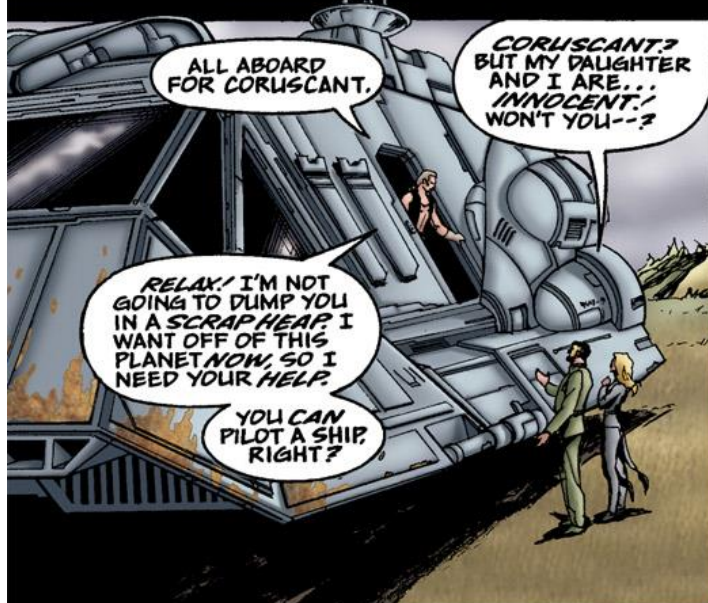
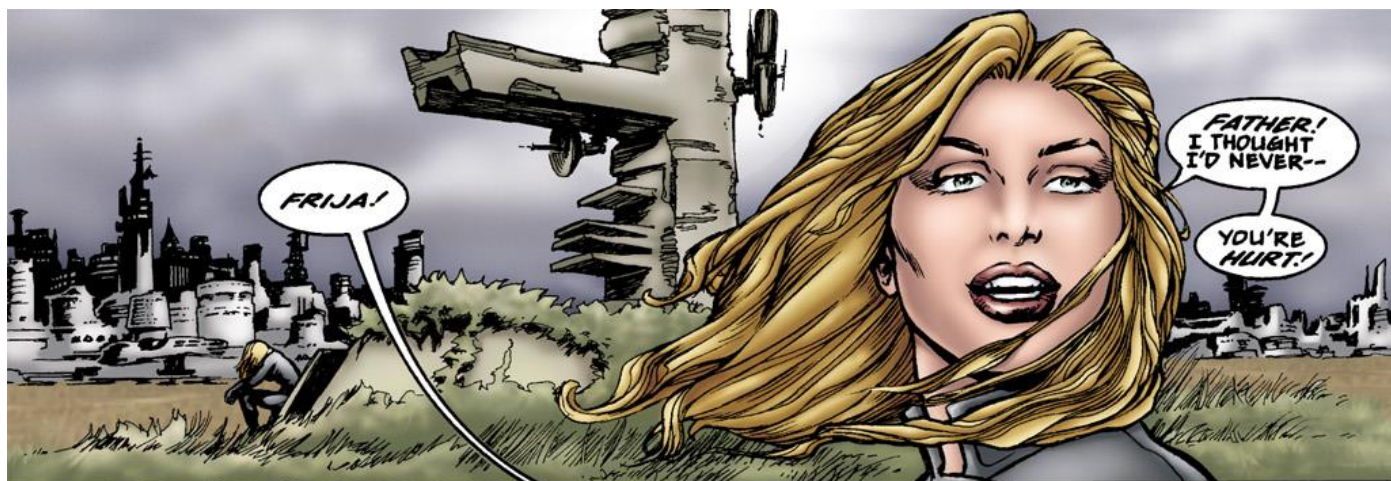
YOU WERE FOOLISH NOT TO KILL THEM, DEAREST.

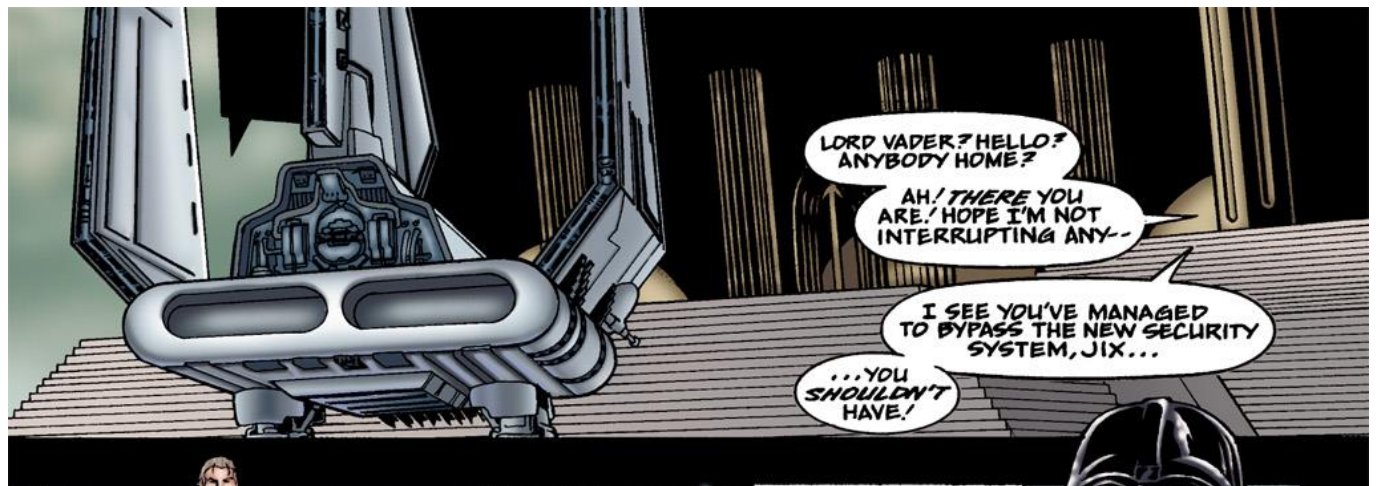
I COULDN'T RISK DARTH VADER FINDING ANY TRACE OF EITHER JIXTON OR THE DROID.

THE DRAGON SLUG WILL DESTROY ALL EVIDENCE, FRIJA.







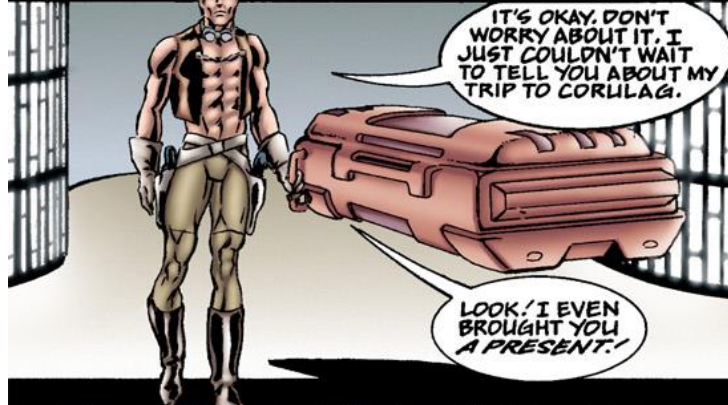


LORD VADER? HELLO?
ANYBODY HOME?

AH! THERE YOU
ARE! HOPE I'M NOT
INTERRUPTING ANY--

I SEE YOU'VE MANAGED
TO BYPASS THE NEW SECURITY
SYSTEM, JIX...

...YOU
SHOULDN'T
HAVE!



IT'S OKAY. DON'T
WORRY ABOUT IT. I
JUST COULDN'T WAIT
TO TELL YOU ABOUT MY
TRIP TO CORULAG.

LOOK! I EVEN
BROUGHT YOU
A PRESENT!



YOU FAILED TO KILL
TORLOCK. IF YOUR
EXPLANATION IS NOT
IMMEDIATE, YOU
WILL DIE...
SLOWLY.

YES, LORD VADER.
WELL, IT'S KIND OF
INVOLVED BUT
HERE'S THE SHORT
VERSION...



GOVERNOR TORLOCK
WASN'T A TRAITOR. HE
ESCAPED CORULAG WHEN
HE DISCOVERED THAT
ADMIRAL DROON-- YOUR
INFORMANT-- PLANNED
TO KILL HIM.

DROON LIED TO
YOU ABOUT TORLOCK,
BECAUSE HE WANTED THE
GOVERNOR'S SEAT. HE
THEN STAGED A MASSIVE
COVER-UP, AND TRIED
TO FAKE TORLOCK'S
DEATH.

WELL, THAT'S THE
STORY. WANT ME TO
LOCATE TORLOCK?

IF YOUR ACCUSATION
HAS MERIT, TORLOCK IS
NOT MY CONCERN.



MERIT? WHY DON'T
YOU ASK ADMIRAL
DROON?

WHERE
AM I?

WHAT HAVE
YOU--?

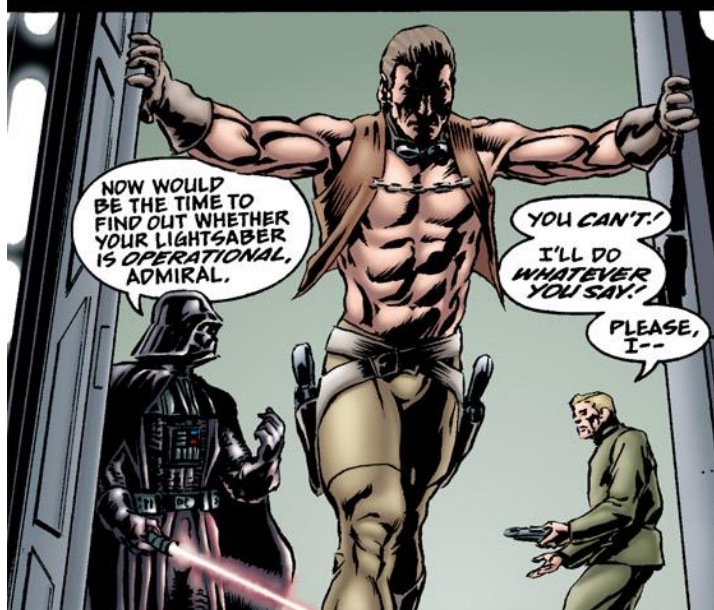
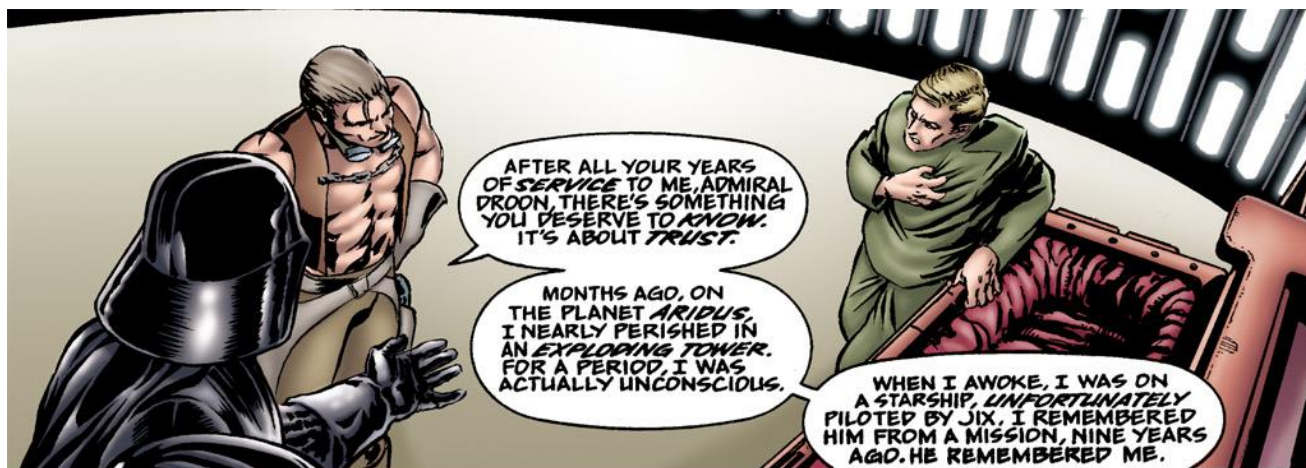


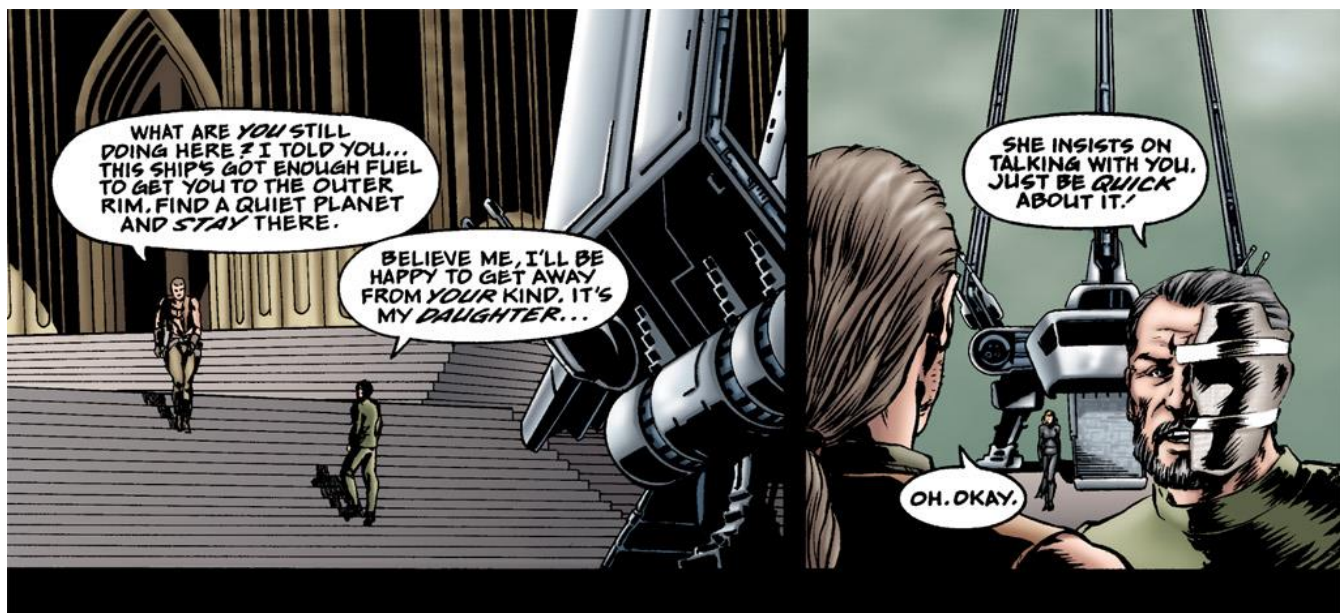
OH--! OH,
MY LORD--!



I-- I DON'T KNOW
WHAT JIXTON TOLD YOU,
M-MY LORD, BUT I ASSURE
YOU I DIDN'T-- I NEVER
MEANT TO--! HE--HE BROKE
INTO MY FORTRESS AND
KILLED ALL OF MY
MEN! HE--!

ENOUGH.





WHAT ARE YOU STILL DOING HERE? I TOLD YOU... THIS SHIP'S GOT ENOUGH FUEL TO GET YOU TO THE OUTER RIM. FIND A QUIET PLANET AND STAY THERE.

BELIEVE ME, I'LL BE HAPPY TO GET AWAY FROM YOUR KIND. IT'S MY DAUGHTER...

SHE INSISTS ON TALKING WITH YOU. JUST BE QUICK ABOUT IT.

OH. OKAY.



I WONDER... WHY ARE YOU HELPING US? I MEAN... WE'RE NOT HUMAN--

THAT'S NOT YOUR FAULT. I DON'T KNOW... MAYBE YOU REMIND ME OF SOMEONE I KNEW.

MAYBE IT WON'T MATTER TO OTHER PEOPLE TOO. BUT THAT'S NOT WHAT I REALLY WANTED TO KNOW. MY FATHER WON'T TELL ME...

... THE HUMAN FRIJA... DID SHE ESCAPE TOO?



YEAH. YEAH. SHE GOT AWAY.

OH, GOOD. I'M GLAD. THANK YOU. I'LL NEVER FORGET-- YOU NEVER TOLD ME YOUR NAME.

JIX.

NOW GO ON-- GET OUT OF HERE.



THE END



STORY OF MY LIFE.

The Most Dangerous Foe

"Deen, tell me a story!"

"All right, Mavis, what kind do you want?" Deen Voorson settled his back against the bulkhead. The star cruiser *Republic's Return* had been assigned to evacuate command and technical personnel from Yavin Base. Deen had offered to settle the crew members' children in their quarters while they were on bridge duty.

"Tell me a story about a dragon," said Mavis, nestling into Deen's lap.

"Oh, no," said Mavis' brother Tarn, hanging out of his bunk into the aisle. "Not another dragon story. Too scary -- they keep her up at night."

"Not all dragon stories are scary," countered Deen. "And not all dragons are scary."

"They look scary," put in another child.

"But things aren't always what they seem," Deen said. "Let me tell you a story my grandmother used to tell me, that happened far, far away and long ago ..."

"How long ago?" asked Tarn.

"A million, zillion years?" asked Mavis.

Deen laughed. "Not that long, Mavis. More like a few thousand years. Back in the high times of the Old Republic, when the Jedi Knights were the defenders of peace and justice..."

* * *

"Mistress Tannis -- it's finished."

"Let me see."

Sixteen-year-old Vici Ramunee assumed the salute stance and thumbed the activation switch on her lightsaber. A shaft of light leapt up between her hands. Mistress Tannis smiled in approval, her indigo eyes sparkling.

"Very good, Vici," said the Omwati. "Your lightsaber is an extension of your mind and a bridge between you and the Force. Use it carefully, as you would any of your other skills, and never draw it in anger."

Vici bowed and, quenching its flame, returned the lightsaber's haft to her belt. "Mistress," she said, "am -- am I a Jedi now?"

The blue-skinned Jedi teacher laughed, a tinkling silver sound. "Always the eager one, aren't you Vici. Patience. One would think the three years you've spent here at the Praxeum have been a lifetime -- but the time for you to return to your homeworld is sooner than you think. Tomorrow you will face one final test, and once you have completed it -- then you will be a Jedi."

Vici's brow wrinkled. "What sort of test, Mistress? And what if I fail?"

Mistress Tannis shook her head, her feathery white hair rippling over her shoulders. "Do not think of failure."

Vici met her teacher at the Praxeum gate shortly before dawn. "You will have from sunrise today to sunrise tomorrow morning to complete your quest, Vici," Tannis said. "As the day breaks, you will head north, into the forest, where you will find the river that will guide you. By nightfall you will be at the foot of the mountains. Travel up the river valley until you reach the Cave of Truth, where Jedi have been tested for thousands of years."

Vici, shivering from cold and excitement, tried to remain still, remembering that a Jedi should not feel the chill and a Jedi stays calm.

"When you succeed in this quest," Tannis continued, "you will be a Jedi Knight. You will have faced your most dangerous foe and triumphed."

"What foe?" Vici asked, startled. Tannis had never told her she was going to have to fight anyone.

Tannis simply smiled and shook her head. "That is for you to learn, child. Now empty your pouch, Vici, the sun will be up in moments and you are to carry nothing with you on your journey."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing. No food, water, or tools. All you will need you will find in the Force. And do not trust your physical senses -- they will deceive you."

"Must I leave my lightsaber'?" Vici asked.

"With your other tools, yes," said Tannis. She watched Vici lay it aside. "You may keep your jewelry," she said as the girl started to remove it.

Thanks, Vici thought, I'll just whack my enemy in the head with my necklace! What's the point of building a lightsaber if you don't use it?

"Use the Force to protect you," said Tannis. Vici started, wondering if the Jedi Master could read her thoughts. "With the Force as your ally, you may overcome all things," Tannis said. "Now go."

As the blue-white sun rippled over the horizon, Vici turned one last time to her teacher. "Mistress Tannis," she said, "what if I fail?"

"The Force is with you. Do not think of failure."

Vici found the river easily and followed it north through the woods. The day warmed quickly as the sun rose, and Vici found herself enjoying her walk. The straight gray trunks of trees rising to a ruffly blue-green canopy overhead reminded her of home; the crunching of leaves under her feet and the calling of birds in the treetops brought back memories of combing the uplands along Lir Lake, gathering t'iiil blossoms with her parents. Now the leaves were brighter, crisper, with every color and shape impressed into her senses, and the birds seemed somehow more alive -- she knew where each one sat without looking, knew the message of each song without pausing to think. The Force drew Vici together with the forest, as if there were no divisions between them, and she gloried in it.

By mid-day, however, Vici was hungry. She knelt to drink from the stream; the water was cold, clear, and fresh as any at home. Knowing that she had to keep on if she were to reach her destination in time, Vici planned to rest for only a few moments.

In stillness Vici suddenly became aware of the presence of a human searching through the forest. "Who's there?" she called aloud. The person was coming closer, and searching for her, she was certain. Vici wondered if this were her enemy come to challenge her already. She leapt to her feet, tensed and ready, reaching out through the Force. *He's looking for me*, she thought, *he's nervous, he's not coming to fight me, he's...*

"Veni!" she cried, spotting her 10-year-old brother scrambling along the river bank. "Veni Ramunee, what are you doing here?" "I didn't want you to be alone!" the boy said, splashing to her through the creek. "I was hiding just inside the gate this morning. I heard what Mistress Tannis said, about you having to meet a dangerous enemy. and I didn't want you to have to do it all by yourself. And I brought you this." He held out Vici's lightsaber. Vici rolled her eyes and sighed. Veni, who had only come to the Jedi Praxeum that year, was utterly devoted to his elder sister. Sometimes too devoted.

"Veni, the whole point of this test is that I do it alone! Now go back to your classes."

"But Vici," said the boy, "I wanna come with you. And ... and I don't know how to get back. I might get lost. I gotta stay with you." "You're j just saying that so I'll let you stay -- you won't get lost and you know it. You just follow the river, then you turn east when the woods get thin, and find your way back to the Praxeum by sensing the others' presence."

"I don't know how to do that yet!" protested Veni. "I have to come with you!"

Vici gave up. "All right, kid, you can come with me as far as the cave, but no farther! You'll have to wait outside when I go in."

Veni grinned. "Here," he said, "take your lightsaber."

"No," said Vici, "Mistress Tannis told me not to bring it."

"Well, what do I do with it?"

"You carry it -- don't try to use it," Vici added quickly, seeing the excitement in the boy's eyes, "just hang it on your belt. Now come on, we have a long way to go."

A few minutes later, Veni said, "Are you hungry, Vici? I made a sandwich. I, uh, took a few bites off it, but you can have ..."

"Finish it yourself," she said.

"All right."

"Are we nearly there?" Veni asked as the sun began to descend.

"We're getting closer," said Vici. "The trees are thinning out and the ground is rising. Mistress Tannis said the cave was at the end of a valley in the mountains."

"Can't we rest? I'm tired. Are we supposed to walk all day and all night?"

"You're not supposed to be here at all, kid. You wanted to come, remember?"

"Oh, yeah." Veni sighed. "But can't we rest?"

"You can do whatever you like. I'm looking for the cave."

Veni sighed again but kept trudging along beside his sister. Vici felt sorry for the boy, but she reminded herself it was his own fault -- nobody had made him follow her.

"I'm hungry," Veni said.

"Tough. You ate the sandwich." *Also his fault*, Vici thought, though it didn't make her feel any less concerned for him. The boy's complaints were bringing her own discomfort to her attention as well. She too was tired and hungry, and caught in a state between eagerness to reach the goal of her journey and fear of what she might find. *A Jedi is centered*, she told herself, *a Jedi feels no extremes. Hunger and weariness are only of the body; a Jedi's strength flows from the Force*. It grew harder, though, for her to will away her exhaustion as the path grew steeper and the ground more rocky. Still she kept on, and her brother followed behind her.

By late afternoon, Vici and Veni had climbed well past the tree line. The valley seemed lifeless except for a few tufts of flowering vende and clusters of spiny planimals nestled against the eastern wall of the canyon to catch the last rays of the sun. By dawn they would have crept by moonlight to the west side of the valley, to absorb the light of dawn; Vici watched their tiny photoreceptors glittering in the sunset like jewels hidden in pin cushions.

"What's that?" she hissed abruptly, halting in mid-stride.

"What's what?" responded Veni, bumping into her.

"Listen."

Now they both heard it -- a faint pounding and thumping coming from far ahead of them, like pistons pumping in a distant machine. "What is it?" Veni asked.

"Shh!" said Vici, closing her eyes and opening her mind. She recoiled at what she found.

"What's wrong'?" demanded Veni, sensing his sister's distress.

"It's alive," Vici said. "It's alive, and it's big, and it's coming toward us."

"How big?"

"Huge."

The thumping quickly grew louder; small pebbles began dropping off the canyon walls and dancing about the ground.

"We gotta get out of here!" said Veni, turning to run.

"No," said Vici, grabbing his shoulder. "Hear how fast it's coming? We'll never outrun it." She looked for somewhere to hide, but the rock faces offered no cover. Neither was climbing an option; she felt confident that with a little push from the Force she could scale the sheer walls, but her brother...

"What do we do? What do we do?" Veni's eyes were wide with terror as the increasing vibrations shook a slab free from the canyon behind them to crash into fragments on the ground. Even the planimals had begun edging away from the sound.

"I'll just have to fight it," said Vici, taking up a firm stance. "Veni, give me my lightsaber,"

"But Mistress Tannis ..."

"Told me not to bring it. She didn't tell you. Hand it over."

Veni complied. Vici activated the blade, its red light splashing around the valley and drawing a few planimals towards her. A plume of smoke from the end of the canyon

heralded the approach of the creature. Coming around the bend into view, it was truly monstrous: over 10 meters of scaly, segmented body overshadowed by enormous leathery wings. Veni, hiding behind his sister, trembled at the sound of 20 powerful reptilian legs plunging toward him in deadly synchronization. Vici tried to master her fear, concentrating on the mighty power of the Force she knew she held tightly in her hands. The creature drew closer, and they could see a hideous, misshapen head, wrinkled and glittering, and dozens of needle-like teeth in a maw large enough to swallow Veni whole. It slowed to a stop as it approached them. Vici took full advantage of what she felt was the beast's momentary confusion and swung her lightsaber in a wide arc; the creature reared several pairs of legs off the ground to avoid the blow.

"Magnetic meteors!" the creature exclaimed, "what kind of a salute is that? What is Mistress Tannis teaching at the Praxeum these days, anyway?"

Vici froze in mid-slash, dumbfounded, as the creature threw seven sets of legs into reverse, backing away from the humans. "Wait," it said, "were you attacking me?" It snorted a puff of steam from its nostrils with a sound Vici assumed was a laugh. "The Sith Wars must be going badly, if Tannis is forced to graduate Jedi who can't tell friend from foe."

"You -- You're our friend?" asked Veni. Fear gave way to curiosity, and he moved out from behind his sister.

"You'd better hope so," it said with another snort. "I am Willm Lywin of the Duinuogwuin, guardian of this valley, and have been so for 600 years, give or take a decade. I have come to escort the initiate -- take it that would be you," it said, looking at Vici with a friendly twinkle in its eye, "to the Cave of Truth."

Vici hung her head in embarrassment, quickly stuffing her deactivated lightsaber haft into her pouch and wondering if Lywin could notice how red her face was. It probably can, she thought. "Master Willm," she said, "I am so sorry!"

"Oh, don't feel bad, child," the creature said with a ripple of its vast wings. "It's not as if this hasn't happened before -- remember I've been helping train Jedi for centuries. Let this be part of your lessons: never rush into conflict, no matter how threatening a situation may seem." It made an odd, clucking sound. "The hardest thing for human initiates is always 'don't be hasty.' Humans are such a fidgety species -- but very interesting," it added, with a glance toward Vici and her brother. "Now come along, let's go. The young lady has work to do before dawn, and the sun has set."

* * *

"So you see," continued Vici, who had been talking to Lywin as they walked, "our parents weren't too happy to see us go, but they understood the responsibilities of being Force-sensitive and let us come here."

"Say, Master Willm," Veni put in from his perch on the creature's back, "where are you from?"

"I told you I've been here for six centuries," it said.

"You were born here?" Veni asked.

"Ah, no -- before I came here, I escorted a Praxeum ship for about four hundred years."

"And before that?"

"Oh, that was so long ago, it wouldn't interest you little humans. Your sister's stories are much more entertaining. Now tell me, Vici, how exactly did you help your parents in their work?"

Vici herself was sure that the life of a thousand-year-old Jedi Star Dragon must be much more interesting than an explanation of I'lahsh distillation, but she respected her escort's obvious wish for privacy and continued. "Well, I'lahsh is made from the nectar of the t'il blossom, and since each blossom contains only one tiny droplet of nectar, it takes hundreds of thousands of blossoms to produce the year's vintage. And because the blossoms are so delicate, they can't be harvested by machine or even by droid -- they have to be picked by hand, one flower at a time."

"And this is your task'?" asked Lywin. He had produced a small datapad from beneath a scaly fold of his skin and was occasionally tapping information into it as he walked.

"We all join in the harvest, the whole family -- brothers, sisters, cousins, everyone. It's so beautiful in the springtime, the t'il grows over everything with little golden trumpets glowing, and the fragrance is all around you until you feel you could get drunk from just breathing. And the flocks of nerfs like white and black specks all over the meadows, and the thrantas with their gondolas winging overhead, and Lir Lake flowing into the sea, with the cetians leaping and singing in the spray. When Delaya is bright in the night sky, sometimes we hardly even sleep, we just keep bringing in the flowers, singing and laughing, all night long. With so many people to be paid, the money doesn't go too far, but I think it's worth it -- how could anyone be paid more than to be able to walk the uplands in springtime? Alderaan is the most beautiful place in the galaxy, and I can hardly wait to see it again."

"Papa and Mamma wouldn't mind getting more money," put in Veni. "Especially since number nine boiler broke down."

"I know," said Vici, "but it's still beautiful." She sighed. "I do wish I could help Mum and Papa with money. They worry so much. All their messages to us keep saying how they need this or want that, and can't afford to buy it."

"Humans do seem overly preoccupied with money," said Lywin, tapping away at his datapad.

"Don't Dweena, um, Dono, uh, Star Dragons use money'?" asked Veni.

"No."

"Then what do you use?"

"As a medium of exchange? We usually trade information. For example, I consider your sister's explanation of I'lahsh production a fair reward for escorting you -- I have often heard of I'lahsh, but had no idea what it was." It paused upon the path. "Ah, here we are, little ones -- the Cave of Truth."

"But that's a dead end!" Veni protested. The valley ended in a cleft piled high with rocks and boulders, over which the beginnings of the stream were trickling.

"Oh, little Jedi, I think your sister knows better than that," said Lywin with a friendly snort.

My physical senses will deceive me, Vici recalled and reached out to the Force. Sure enough, she found that the mound of stone concealed an opening into the cliff side. The largest of the boulders was too heavy for human arms to lift, but through the Force ... She began carefully levitating each stone away from the opening and setting them in a pile to one side.

"Can I help'?" asked Veni.

"No," said Lywin, "this is part of her test."

Soon Vici had cleared away enough small stones for the larger boulders, now unsupported, to roll away from the opening. The stream dropped down in a waterfall, silver beads in the moonlight, curtaining a dark tunnel. Vici shivered in excitement; here was where the real adventure began.

"Calm yourself, little Jedi," Lywin admonished gently. "Through peace we feel the Force."

Vici took several deep breaths, slowing her pulse and calming her mind. When she felt herself centered once more, she asked, "What am I to do now?"

"Enter the cave," said Lywin. "It is now five hours until dawn. You have that long to search out the cave and face its challenge. Your brother and I will wait for you here. Go, and may the Force be with you."

Vici bowed in salute to Master Willm and turned to enter the cave. Cold drops of water hit the back of her neck like icy needles; she shook them off and walked on into blackness.

The cave seemed to be a straight tunnel, dark except for moonlight filtering in from the opening, boring into the heart of the mountain. Vici began walking quickly. The path sloped down, and soon the light of the entrance was gone. Vici was walking in total blackness. After a time she quickened her pace, eager to meet the challenge of the cave. Suddenly she found herself fetched up against a solid wall. *A dead end?* she thought. *That's impossible!* But no matter how she probed, physically and mentally, she found no way forward. *Well what do I do?* She laughed. *Of course,* she thought, *how silly of me! "Don't be hasty, "Master Willm said. I must've passed an opening in the wall on my way down.* She began retracing her steps slowly and carefully.

She found a doorway concealed in the rock-face on the right side of the tunnel; slight pressure slid it open. She moved down the new tunnel cautiously; she was not going to make the mistake of rushing past a door again. The next door led her right again, the next after that, left. Time passed, whether minutes or hours she could not tell, The darkness of the tunnels was complete. Vici could not have seen less if she were blind, yet her sense of the tunnel walls through the Force more than compensated. She did not lose her path again, and continued turning: left again, right, left again. She wondered how much farther she had to go, and how much time she had left, but she resisted the temptation to hurry, calmly opening one door after another.

Unexpectedly Vici came upon a well-lit chamber. After so long in blackness her eyes stung, and she covered her face with her hands, Slowly adjusting to the light, Vici opened her eyes again and began to make out the contents of the room.

It was not as bright as it had originally seemed. The illumination came from a small fire burning in a hearth-niche to Vici's left, Between Vici and the hearth was a large chair, its back to her; across from the chair was a table. All the details of the room, from the way the walls curved into the low, domed ceiling and the colored glass screen before the hearth to the plantlike forms of the carved table legs, brought back memories of Vici's home, and she suddenly realized how badly she wanted to be there, and how truly tired she was.

And how truly hungry. The table was laid with a supper for one; across the room she could see a pile of little cakes, what seemed to be a quarter roast bhillen, cheese and fruit, and a pot of tea with steam curling gently from the spout. *Is this for me?* she wondered. *I'm so tired -- I could sit down, just for a minute, and have some food -- still,* Vici, she told herself, *you know if you sat down you'd fall asleep in two seconds and not wake up in time to finish the test. I can always come back. No telling who could happen if my enemy caught me*

napping. Besides, remember what Mistress Tannis said. This may not be what it seems... She thought she caught a glimpse of movement on the table and moved closer.

"Ugh!" she cried as a rat leapt from the cake plate to the floor. Her stomach churned as she saw that the cheese was a writhing mass of maggots; shiny black beetles scuttled out from beneath the beneath the bhillen, the fruits burst and collapsed in a puff of rot. "How revolting!" she said and turned away from the table ... Only to cry out in alarm at the occupant of the chair behind her: a skeleton, clad in moldering, tunic and breeches identical to her own. She clutched at her pendant in horror as the firelight winked off its twin at the breast of the corpse. *What can this mean?* She began to think, but no sooner had she begun to calm her jangling nerves when the apparition of death faded away into nothingness; Vici turned, and the table was empty as well, its loathsome contents vanished like a dream. Vici shook her head. "Cave of Truth'?" she said. "More like the Cave of Lies! Still," she mused, "perhaps that's part of the test -- to find the truth behind the lies?" She began probing for a door. She found it behind a curtain.

It opened into chaos: a black, yawning void filled with rushing winds. *Surely I'm not supposed to just leap out into that!* she thought, drawing back and slamming the door. However, it was the only way forward. She checked the room again; she found no other openings, and the door she had come in by wouldn't open again. "Well," she said, "this must be it." She opened the chaos-door again; wind blew back her hair as she stood on the threshold. *This room looked safe*, but wasn't -- *well, sort of*, she thought, *so maybe?* She drew a deep breath. "May the Force be with me," she said and stepped out into the void.

The winds lifted her like a feather on a gentle spring breeze. Sooner than she would have liked, however, she found herself deposited upon a ledge. Two doors opened before her onto a pair of tunnels, one sloping up, the other down. *Which one do I take?* she wondered. She closed her eyes; *down*, she decided, *the down one feels right*. She started along it.

The passage began growing smaller. Soon Vici found herself stooping, then crawling on hands and knees as the tunnel shrank around her. Part of her mind began wondering if she'd taken the right tunnel. *No*, she thought, *it still feels like the right way, even though it's certainly not easy*.

Eventually she was forced to crawl along on her belly. *I hope that whomever I'm supposed to fight doesn't catch me like this*, she thought. *And I hope I don't run into any more rats and bugs, even illusionary ones*. She paused, peering forward in the gloom. She could see a faint light ahead, and she crawled toward it.

"At last," she sighed, wriggling from the tunnel into an open chamber. Drawing a few deep breaths, she looked around. This room was merely a rough cave; streaks of pale gold light crisscrossed about the walls in a glowing web. An archway opened on one side. Vici got up

and, brushing dirt from her tunic, moved toward it, when a flash from the floor caught her eye. She looked more closely and saw, lying near the wall as if dropped and forgotten, a fist-sized crystal glowing with its own inner light: a corusca gem, the most highly prized jewel in the galaxy, formed in the core of a gas giant. *That's worth enough credits to let my parents hire half of Alderaan to pick t'iiil blossoms and still have cash to spare -- and it's just lying in the dust, waiting for me to pick it up? I don't think so. This must be another test, she thought, to see if I can resist it*

"All right, Mistress Tannis," she said, "I'm getting the hang of this cave ... Ouch!" she said, trying to walk out the door. The threads of light crossing the opening had stung her flesh like hot wires, and even as she drew back they glowed fiercely. Vici moved a hand toward them again; their light intensified as they bent toward her. She backed away; they faded. She moved closer to a wall, and the light-strings there began to move and glow threateningly. *I've got to get past this web. I wonder -- do these strings respond just to me, or to any movement?*

She reached out to take the corusca gem, planning to throw it at the web. The strands closest to it sprang to life, moving to wrap themselves about the stone, throbbing fiercely. Vici's fingertips stuck to the stone; with effort she jerked her hand away, her fingers smarting. Reevaluating her plan, Vici nudged the gem through the power of the Force, and more glowing threads were wound to it. She looked over her shoulder at the doorway; the light threads covering it had been partially tugged aside. *It's like a myrmin being balled up in spider web, the way the strands stick to the jewel, she thought. I hate to think what could have happened to me if I had just grabbed it.* She continued to nudge with her mind, rolling the jewel carefully around the edge of the floor until all of the glowing net was wrapped about it and the passage out was clear.

The next chamber was lined with softly glowing mirrors that threw Vici's image back upon her in dozens of distorted reflections. She shut her eyes and sensed her way forward. *I must be near the end, she thought. My foe must be near.*

"Hello!" she called. "I'm Vici Ramunee -- is anyone going to challenge me?" Her voice echoed around the mirrored labyrinth but met no answer. She opened her eyes.

A flicker of a color different from her clothing caught her eye; she turned to see, as if through a window, the familiar grounds and buildings of the Praxeum. She reached out a hand, and the image faded away. She rounded the next corner of the maze, and thought she caught a glimpse of her parents. "Papa?" she called. *What does this mean?* She thought. *It's all illusion. She tried to follow the images through the maze as they flashed and faded across the mirrors -- friends, family, places she'd known -- but they seemed to lead her*

around in circles. "This is getting silly," she said. "Am I supposed to fight someone, or not?" She closed her eyes again. *All right, this way,* she decided.

The next time she opened her eyes, she found herself in a mirrored cul-de-sac. *How can I have gone wrong?* she wondered as she turned around. A mirrored panel slid shut behind her; now she was enclosed in a mirror-lined box. "Oh, I see," she said, "new puzzle -- get out of this room." She began systematically probing the walls for an exit, but found nothing. Examining the floor found a puddle of water in one corner. Vici knelt down; water was seeping in through a hairline crack between the walls, but she still couldn't find a door.

Looking around, she saw water beginning to leak in at the other seams of the room. Her feet were quite wet.

"Well, this is nice," she said. "If I could use the Force to turn myself into a water molecule, I could squeeze out. Now where's the door? And where is my enemy?"

She continued unsuccessfully testing the walls, floor and ceiling of the room as the water kept rising. When it got to her knees, she stopped, as a cold thought hit her. "It's a trap," she said softly to her reflections. "My enemy's led me into a trap somehow."

She started pounding on the walls; her mirror reflections made it look as if a crowd of young women were fighting. "This isn't funny!" she said. "Is my most dangerous foe supposed to be water?" She threw her shoulder against a wall; she and her reflection met with a dull thud. "This isn't fair!" she cried. The water was corning in faster now, rising visibly. "This isn't fair!" she repeated. "Who are you! This is no way to fight, to drown someone! Show yourself! Come on out and face me!" Vici's eyes darted frantically about the chamber, but all she saw were frightened reflections and the rising water. "What kind of crazy test is this? So help me," she said, "if you don't let me out, whoever you are, I'm going to cut my way out! And then you'd better be ready to defend yourself, because I'm going to cut my way through you!"

She drew her lightsaber, preparing to strike the mirror using all of her strength, but the shocking sight of a young woman attacking with blazing weapon, hip-deep in murky water, face twisted in a furious grimace, froze her in mid-swing. *I look awful!* she thought, *like some kind of deranged Dark Jedi. No wonder Mistress Tannis said don't draw it in anger -- I could scare the pants off half the galaxy with that face...*

"Don't draw it in anger," she said, lowering the blade. "And I'm pretty angry now ..." She deactivated the lightsaber. The reflection did likewise. She laughed at it. "You don't look so dangerous now," she said. "Maybe we should have gone on and attacked our enemy after all ... A dangerous-looking enemy?" she mused. The water was up to her chest. "Am I supposed to fight my reflection?" she asked herself. "Flow?" She reached out to the mirror;

the mirror hand reached gently back. They touched; Vici's hand passed through the mirror as through the surface of the water. Not stopping to think, Vici pushed through the wall.

* * *

"Congratulations, Vici," said Mistress Tannis, sitting in the small room Vici had entered.

"You have passed your test."

She blinked, confused. "But I haven't fought anything."

"Haven't you?" said Tannis. "Think back -- what have you faced in the cave'?"

Vici thought. "Well, I missed a door -- I was impatient."

Tannis nodded. "Impatience can be a deadly enemy to a Jedi."

"And I was tired, and hungry, but everything in the room I found decayed and vanished -- like all matter," Vici added in realization. "So in that room I fought physical limits ..."

Tannis nodded.

"And the wind -- I fought fear, and the tight tunnel was doubt, and the corusca gem, that was greed. And the mirrors were, were..." She paused. "I kept trying to follow things that seemed important, but they led me nowhere. When I let the Force guide me, instead of trying to find the way myself, I moved on."

"And the last room?"

She thought. "Fear and impatience, again -- and anger. I fought myself. Am I my own worst enemy?"

Tannis smiled gently. "Nothing outside of us may separate us from the Force ..."

"Only our own emotions," said Vici as understanding filled her mind.

"And if we remain open to the Force," said Tannis.

"Then we are Jedi, and nothing can hurt us. We have nothing to fear," said Vici.

* * *

"Good story," murmured Mavis sleepily as Deen ended his tale.

"Yes, I really liked it," said a young man's voice from the doorway. Deen started at the intrusion.

"Sir, how long have you been ..."

"No don't get up," the man said, laughter in his voice. "I just came to thank you for repairing my droid."

"Oh, yes, of course, Sir," Deen said, trying to seem properly awestricken while still covered with children. "The rest of the tech crew wanted to wipe his memory, but I figured with the things he'd seen..."

"He'd want to keep his rmemory," finished the pilot. "Thanks. And thanks for the story. I loved it. I wish I'd been able to hear stories like that when I was a kid."

Deen grinned and nodded. "We don't have anything to worry about now, Sir, now that you've joined us, do we?"

"Not if we remain open to the Force."

Annual NewsNet Summary

NAR SHADDAA NODE: In this special edition of the *Nal Hutta Kal'tamok*, the galaxy's most reliable and accurate independent business journal, we will be examining the information networks and news bureaus which service the known universe and keep it running. In-depth analyses of the various services follows, but in this initial article, we offer a short summary of some of the most prominent and useful newsnet services available. Note that some of these services are not available in all sectors, and others are available only by invitation. Reception of several is quite illegal, including the one you are now reading.

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■ FILEFORM..D.PAD/DOWNLOAD ■ SOURCEFILE: NEWS NETS ■ READING..

Galactic newsnets are, for the most part, Imperial-approved news sources, which is a polite way of saying they are censored and slanted to favor the Empire. Nonetheless, they are important sources of news. There is no question that Imperial HoloVision and Galaxy News Service are the two most powerful of these networks.

Imperial HoloVision: One of the most influential and powerful of the galaxy's news services. IHV has over 28,000 bureaus on planets throughout the Empire, and the various independent powers around it, including glorious Hutt space, the Corporate Sector Authority, and the Tion Hegemony. For each of these 28,000 bureaus, IHV has at least one additional local network to draw news from.

Galaxy News Service: GNS has a similar infrastructure, but does not tend to extend coverage to independent powers. It seems to have a slight edge over IHV in scooping big stories close to Coruscant.

Regional newsnets do not have the galaxy-wide distribution that the Big Two have. They serve a smaller, more local market, often a sector, or cluster of sectors. Some have established links with one of the Big Two for more extensive distribution, but this is of limited utility, since only the stories deemed newsworthy by IHV or GNS are approved for galactic distribution. TriNebulon News shows signs of expanding, and is increasingly available along the major trade routes.

Core News Digest: CND is far from the only newsnet operating in the Core, but it is one of the major Core newsnets which is widely circulated beyond Core boundaries. CND covers everything newsworthy in the Core, with the proper Imperial spin, of course. Beyond the Core, CND's most popular articles deal with Core politics, economics, and sports.

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Darpa SectorNet: A conglomeration of smaller local news networks which cover newsworthy events in the Darpa sector, especially news emanating from Esseles, the sector capital. Darpa sector is a key industrial center in the Core, and its official newsnet is widely carried throughout the galaxy.

Colonial News Net: A network which covers most of the sectors in the Colonies. Its news is gathered by 18 independent local news networks, each of which covers a number of systems. Colonial News Net is pro-Imperial and very much a champion of law and order. This causes some friction between Imperial political offices and the Colonial News Net, because the latter expects the Empire to obey its own edicts and laws. When its representatives fail to do so, Colonial News Net does not hesitate to criticize the offending officials.

TriNebulon News: TRI is the voice of the Empire in the Outer Rim Territories. It covers about a quarter of Outer Rim systems officially, though it has a much wider circulation through alternative distribution channels. TRI is something of a sensational news organ, and favors a tabloid approach to news coverage. It has a reputation for focusing on trivial stories, while ignoring more substantial issues, but this seems to be changing over time.

NovaNetwork. Covers the same territory as TRI, and with similar editorial policies. It is very protective of its trademarks, and maintains a somewhat precarious balance between favoring pro-Imperial nationalistic policies and individual rights.

Sektor 242 NewsLine. Sektor 242 NewsLine is one of the few major newsnets of the Outer Rim which largely refuses to sacrifice integrity and accuracy to New Order ideology.

It escapes Imperial censorship by simply ignoring stories which it cannot criticize openly without persecution. Sektor 242 has a blind spot when it comes to economic reporting.

Special interest newsnets do not have specific regional or territorial beats. They are often circulated by the same distribution networks which carry the major news organs, but are themselves independent.

Coruscant Daily NewsFeed. The CDF reports on events in the Imperial capital, and gives readers and viewers a glimpse into life on Coruscant. It often can be relied upon to profile those in favor at Court (it is always useful to know whom one must flatter), and report on surface events at Court. Naturally, those interested in more than fluffy gossip about those in favor must look elsewhere. The only people criticized in CDF with conviction are those who have fallen irreparably out of favor in Court. This is a safe editorial policy, since such figures are usually dead.

Imperial Defense Daily. IDD covers the defense industry, and is widely regarded as the premier source of expert information on defensive and offensive systems. Naturally, IDD limits its coverage to non-classified programs and battlecraft, though the reporting is so thorough that "blind spots" in coverage of funding, manpower, and resources can often indicate where black programs are impacting the Imperial machine to those who know what to look for. Many system governments and independent organizations use IDD to shop for their own defense packages.



Human Events Network. HEN concentrates on Imperial High Culture as it is applied everywhere in the Empire. Most of its coverage is centered on the Core Worlds with close cultural ties with Coruscant, but it does cover the Colonies, Mid Rim, and Outer Rim Territories as well, spotlighting worlds and programs which present the Empire in a good light.

New Order Progressive. *New Order Progressive*, which until recently represented Coruscant's New Order Party, is now the official commentary magazine of COMPNOR's Coalition for Progress. It covers the arts, sciences, economics, and education — all, naturally, with the proper Imperial spin. It also serves as an unofficial support organ for local New Order political parties and clubs in various Imperial systems.

Herglic Trading Journal, Basic Edition. The *Herglic Trading Journal* is one of the finest financial publications available in the galaxy (its editor-in-chief is currently a Hutt). Its Basic edition is widely read by investors, traders, and government officials throughout the Empire, though no one is particularly anxious to brag about it, since the Empire would much rather you read the human publication which is its closest rival, the *Corellian Times*.

Independent Traders' Infonet. The ITI is a semi-legal publication which serves the spacer community. It covers a wide range of issues of interest to small-time independent traders and merchants. It is not circulated through normal newsnet channels, but is easily found in spaceport kiosks. It specializes in researching fields and new markets and trends in trading which independent spacers cannot afford to investigate on their own.

Galactic Resorts. *Galactic Resorts* is one of the thousands of special interests magazines which circulate

throughout the newsnet infrastructure. I single it out for personal reasons. When I travel, I enjoy staying in fine accommodations, and GR's profiles of luxury resorts, vacation locations, spas, and hotels are very helpful in selecting those which cater to the needs of Hutts. GR's hundreds of roving freelance reporters cover a wide variety of resorts catering to a wide variety of tastes and species.

There are thousands of subversive newsnets circulating, which are independent of or hostile to the Empire. We'll profile a few of the more prominent and important in our coming series. Here is a summary of these newsnets.

Nal Hutta Kal'tamok, Basic Edition. Naturally, we begin with this glorious publication, the Hutt newszine *Nal Hutta Kal'tamok*. The *Nal Hutta Kal'tamok* covers economic and political issues related to the buying, selling, and transportation of contraband goods. It is regarded as one of the most elite of financial journals, and is widely read throughout the Empire, though seldomly openly.

Cynabar's InfoNet. Cynabar's Infonet — which recently dropped out of sight for a few months after igniting a fierce Imperial attempt to eradicate it — is back in business. The big CYN covers news of interest to smugglers, and often features inside information not yet available to other news outlets. CYN is very exclusive, and few are asked to join its select group of subscribers (and invitation is the only way of obtaining a subscription to this very expensive newszine). You may be sure you have made a name for yourself as a smuggler if you are a CYN subscriber. No one knows for sure, by the way, just who or what Cynabar is.

Holonet Free Republic. The HFR is one of the rather tedious pro-Rebel Alliance newsnets, which promotes the bias of its ideology to all who will listen. I mention it because HFR has one of the most efficient and wide-spread network of courier droids around, and broadcasts in nearly every Imperial-held system.

Alderaan Expatriate Network. Another Rebel-affiliated newsnet. This one is worth following because its reporters were professionals before joining the Rebel cause, and still maintain high journalistic standards despite their ideology. They cover many of the same stories as the mainstream Imperial press, and have friends in many important places. They provide a useful counter to the pro-Imperial news, as long as you keep their own bias in mind.

This concludes our summary of the main newsnets we will be covering in our special edition. Data packet XL-J109 contains the complete breakdown of these and 35 additional newsnets.

Jatz Musician Roi Debuts New Slug

By Tanda Marelle

ARCOPOLA, GRECCIA: Flamboyant jatz musician Fitz Roi debuted his new sound slug *Tymin' Downband* at the Arcopola Baas Music Festival this week by performing live several selections from the slug for a crowd of fans numbering in the hundreds of thousands. The crowd was particularly lively since this is the first live performance Roi has given at a music festival since losing his trademark heirloom pistols at the Priole Danna Festival two years ago.

This is Roi's third trip out to the Rim in as many years, and it is rumored that he is on the verge of picking up a sponsor again, one who resides in the Outer Rim Territories (no word yet on who that might be, however). Roi announced at the concert that he is beginning a new impromptu concert tour. His tour is scheduled to begin on Arcopola's sister world of Gambolla, so local fans will not have far to travel to catch his next concert.

Luxury Liner Lost With All Hands — Terrorist Sabotage

CADOMAI, BRELLA: The *Calabar Queen*, one of the exclusive luxury starliners of the Imperial Corusca Line, exploded without warning as it entered final approach to Cadomai, a small resort world located on the Hydian Way hyperlane near the Empire's border with the Corporate Sector. Justice Action League terrorists claimed responsibility for the act, and stated in a press release that since the Empire was bringing its military might to bear on independent worlds of the Colonies and Outer Rim Territories, they were bringing their war of terror to the Core Worlds in retaliation.

Investigators with the Imperial Transport Commission are rushing to the scene to determine the cause of the disaster, but early reports by the Space Rescue Corps and local law enforcement agencies suggest that the accident truly was a result of sabotage.

Core citizens are in an uproar about the incident, and are demanding that Imperial officials do something about the threat of terrorist action in the heart of the Core. "The Empire stands for law and order," said Jerri Gabell of Citizens Against Unrest. "It has to respond to this threat, or people are going to lose confidence in the Imperial system."

Moff Harlow of Catarlo sector promises immediate action. "But before we jump in with both feet, we must be sure JAN, or some other Rebel terrorist organization, is truly responsible," he said in a press conference convened this morning. "I know emotions are high, but we must wait for the ITC investigation to submit its findings before taking any action. I do promise that if terrorists turn out to be at the root of this sorry affair, we will take drastic actions to prevent its repetition."

Among those who died in the disaster were several Moffs and governors, as well as prominent high-ranking officers in the Imperial Army and Navy.

Thrawn Said to be Returning to Core

CORUSCANT NODE: Word has it that Grand Admiral Thrawn, long absent from the hustle-bustle life of inner system intrigue, is en route for Coruscant. He has spent several years commanding one of Palpatine's roving armadas in border systems near the Outer Rim, destroying pirate bands, Rebel fleets, and alien ne'er-do-wells alike.

And doing a fine job of it, from all we've heard.

Why should we care that one of Palpatine's Grand Admirals is returning to the fold? Well, mainly because he *is* a grand admiral. Palpatine has elevated few beings to this most august of military ranks, and only one not of pure human stock — Thrawn is an extremely dangerous and capable man. It would be a good idea to be on guard until we learn exactly what the Emperor means him to do. A loose grand admiral is not someone to turn one's back on.



Tombat Sacks Famed Collection of Rim Whiphid Tycoon

GAMBOLLA, DOCK CITY: In the dregs of the Outer Rim Territories, the art collection of the Whiphid business tycoon Baron Galrowk is recognized by those educated few who live there as a bright oasis in a cultural wasteland. This oasis has been plundered by the infamous art and jewel thief known only as the Tombat.

The heist occurred at some point during a local holiday late last week, when Galrowk hosted a huge party in the apartments above the museum. The theft of several priceless artworks stored in a sealed vault in the museum basement was discovered early the next morning, the small trademark quella stone announcing to the galaxy that the Tombat has struck again.

Inspector Zanza Gata, IOCI's special investigator assigned to the Tombat case, has arrived on the scene, and promptly gone to work. He has interviewed many of the people who were present at the party, from local ministers and political figures, to entertainers and members of the glamour press, to members of the staff. He has not reported substantial leads thus far, though observers suspect he might have pieced together more than he is letting on, especially since he arrived on Gambolla within a day of the heist — far too soon for a transport from the Mid-Rim to reach this remote planet.

Baron Galrowk's famed private museum, open to the elites of the Spadja sector (and to those others he wishes to impress), contains ancient artifacts from pre-Republic eras, many of which are the sole representatives of their kind. The collection, valuable beyond measure, was protected by an extremely sophisticated security system. Alas for Baron Galrowk, the security system which can keep out the Tombat has yet to be invented.

Bethal Apocia Timber Industry Revived by Aggressive Replanting Program

BETHAL, ALTOONA: Nearly three years have passed since a greddleback insect plague devastated Bethal's apocia hardwood timber industry, but an aggressive replanting and restoration planting program has shaved decades off the estimated period of non-production.

Bethal's economy historically has relied on its timber exports, and the past few years have been very hard on the planet's populace. Fortunately, Moff Tendd's declaration of Bethal as an Imperial disaster world has won it aid and emergency funding which have been crucial in keeping the economy from totally collapsing.

The funds have also made it possible to begin restoration programs, including reseedling, the purchase and planting of saplings from offworld growers, and salvaging of damaged forests. Bethal has also made an attempt to diversify its economy beyond timber by introducing new agricultural programs which encourage farmers to use land razed by the greddlebacks for more traditional crops while awaiting the maturation of the first new generation of apocia trees.

It is expected that the apocia industry will require another three decades of tending before Bethal can once again begin producing processed timber planks near the rates it was before the disaster occurred.



Pinacism Movement Spreading Through Brema Sector

CMAOLIDI, MALLONORE: The Pinacism movement, characterized by a belief that those who sit out the grand events of history will eventually emerge to pick up the pieces, is sweeping communities in Brema sector. Numerous city councils and community governments are withdrawing their leaders from sector affairs, and some are restructuring their communities to reduce dependence on outside sources.

Some sector authorities are worried about potential problems with the Empire if the spread of Pinacism continues. Nalco Farell, a Thimwa precinct director, says that he is worried that his constituents, many of whom are Pinacists, will not remain content with insularity. "There is a real concern, both here and in the Moff's office, that the [Pinacist] communities will eventually move to withdraw from the Empire and form independent enclaves. That, of course, is a violation of the Imperial charter."

Moff Malcom's office has released a statement requesting communities to discourage Pinacism recruitment.

37:10:19/CDN/G76D/COR.1.IPC/POL

Vader Assigned to Accompany Task Force to Outer Rim

CORUSCANT, IMPERIAL CITY: The Emperor announced in Court today that Lord Darth Vader will be joining Admiral Ozzel's Death Squadron. Ozzel's task force is scheduled to leave the Core for an unspecified length of time — at least six months, according to some estimates.

The reason for Vader's departure from Imperial Center is unclear. Vader often leaves Coruscant on the Emperor's business, but seldom for more than a few weeks. Some Court observers theorize that Vader has displeased the Emperor in some way, and is being banished from Court as a punishment. Others say that Vader himself requested the assignment for his own reasons.

Whatever the reason, Grand Admiral Tigellinus is definitely looking chipper this evening. Small wonder, with one of his greatest rivals out of the way for the foreseeable future.

Super Star Destroyer *Executor* Unveiled In Kuat Ceremony

KUAT, IMPERIAL TRANSFER POST: The *Executor*, the first in a new class of Super Star Destroyers, was officially commissioned in a ceremony held at the Imperial Transfer Post near the Kuat system. The august Emperor himself presided over the ceremony, flanked by Lord Darth Vader, Admiral Thrawn and Grand Admiral Tigelinus. Members of the Navy's general staff were also present, among them Admirals Tander, Ozzel, and Tavares.

The *Executor*, which completed a six-month-long shake-down cruise just five weeks ago, will join Admiral Ozzel's newly formed Death Squadron, a task force charged with locating Rebel military forces. Ozzel is expected to transfer his flag to the *Executor* before the Death Squadron heads for the Outer Rim next month. Darth Vader is expected to accompany the fleet as the Emperor's liaison.

The *Super*-class Star Destroyer is the largest ship in all of Known Space. Five times the length of the Imperial Star Destroyer, the *Super*-class boasts over a thousand turbolaser batteries, ion cannons, and tractor beam emplacements. It carries 12 squadrons of fighters and support vessels, 25 AT-AT walkers, 50 AT-STs, and an assortment of other ground assault vehicles. Over a quarter million men and 10,000 droids crew the mighty fortress, including an entire corps of stormtroopers and Army troopers.

Three additional *Super*-class Star Destroyers are in their final phases of construction at undisclosed locations, according to Navy officials. They are scheduled to enter service over the next 16 months.

37:11:9/COL/TNL4/LAN.5.SHN/Subject Classification

Hutt Enclave Driven From Lirra

LIRRA, SHANDO: Imperial forces claimed Lirra and surrounding systems over the weekend, driving out the Hutt dynasty which has ruled the planet for the past nine decades. The take-over was largely peaceful, and the Shando metro area is calm this morning.

Pressure to send in Imperial troops to reclaim the planet grew in intensity three months ago when an undercover news investigation team revealed that over a million human slaves were living on Lirra to serve the Jhank Shel Hutt clan.

In his address claiming the planet, Moff Heedra of Baxel sector declared Lirra a disaster planet. Government relief assistance groups are en route to Lirra to give aid to the new Imperial citizens and help them build a new society. It is expected that the Emperor's staff will appoint a governor to supervise the rebuilding of the planet's infrastructure.

Lirra, which is on the border of Hutt space and Baxel sector, is a resort world well known for its extensive networks of mineral pools and mud flats. Settlement rights disputes between the Jhank Shel clan and the human Imperial citizens of Baxel sector span three centuries. The Jhank Shel clan claimed the world nearly a hundred years ago by moving enough of its members to Lirra to outnumber the human settlers. Once they had a majority, the Hutts called for a plebiscite to bring the world into the Hutt fold.

The Hutt government has lodged an official protest with Coruscant, but there has been no official response thus far.

Thrawn Inducted into Order of Canted Circle

CORUSCANT, IMPERIAL CITY: Admiral Thrawn was inducted into the august Order of the Canted Circle this evening in the traditional open ceremony held in the Skydome Botanical Gardens. Court observers are amazed, both because Thrawn is not a pure human, and because he is the fourteenth member to be admitted in ten years; traditionally, only eleven members are admitted in a decade.

An Order member, who desires to remain anonymous, claims that Thrawn's invitation came at the behest of the Emperor himself, who is known to be quite pleased with Thrawn's work in the Outer Rim. This source adds that some members rose in forceful opposition to Thrawn's induction, until Palpatine's wishes were made known.

Though the source declined to name names, it is almost certain that Grand Admiral Ruffan Tigelius was one of the opposition leaders. It is common knowledge that Thrawn's return to Coruscant has badly disrupted his plans. Tigelius has spent the past year assembling one of the Court's most powerful factions.

The Order of the Canted Circle is one of the most ancient and exclusive social organizations on Coruscant.

Galladinium Datalog Banned in Spirva Sector

LENTHALIS, HREAS PORT CITY: Moff Shinda of Spirva sector announced yesterday that the famed Galladinium Datalog was being placed on a sector-wide contraband list, effective immediately.

The move does not come entirely as a surprise to observers, who note that sector law enforcement agencies have had increasing difficulty in combating street gangs and anti-Empire groups employing goods obtained from the datalog, most notably modified gladiator walkers and personal weapons.

Gans Dent, associate director of Galladinium Galactic Exports, announced today that the shipping company would comply with the ban, and cancel all orders originating from Spirva sector. Another company official, who asked not to be identified, said that Galladinium was cooperating with Imperial investigators in tracking down customers who may have illegally modified equipment obtained from Galladinium.

Notables Absent from New Year Fete Week

CORUSCANT, IMPERIAL CITY: The famed Shaldania Parade opened Coruscant's New Year Fete Week, a celebration Imperial Court observers note was not well-attended by the Empire's most influential personalities.

The parade was filled with the traditional displays of Imperial power, including an entire corps of the Palace's elite stormtroopers, a column of AT-ST walkers, and a fabulous fireworks display released by thousands of TIE bombers soaring above the city spires.

Observers paid more attention to the absence of some of the Imperial Court's key players. For the second year in a

row, the Emperor spent his Fete Week attending to official Imperial business in the Deep Core. Alec Pradeux, one of Emperor Palpatine's close advisors, assured newsnet correspondents that Palpatine was in good spirits and health, though he hinted that the Emperor was busy finalizing plans to deal with the last vestiges of the terrorist Rebel Alliance. Pradeux and some of his fellow Advisors—including Sate Pestage, Bregius Golthan and Kren Blista-Vanee—presided over most of the Fete Week celebrations.

Darth Vader was absent from the festivities, though he rarely appears during Fete Week. Last month Vader left Imperial City to oversee Admiral Ozzel's Death Squadron in the Outer Rim Territories. There has been much speculation about Vader's departure. Whether the Emperor sent him away as punishment for some unknown transgression or Vader requested the assignment himself remains to be revealed. Ozzel's task force is charged with locating and eradicating Rebel military installations.

Two of the Imperial Court's most interesting figures, Grand Admiral Tigellinus and Admiral Thrawn, also failed to attend the New Year celebrations. The two have been major adversaries throughout internal Court politics. Their followers within Court factions continue to maneuver for more powerful positions even in their leaders' absence.

Court observers refused to comment on the absence of such notable rivals. Imperial Advisor and spokesman Alec Pradeux made a statement regarding the unusually high number of Court officials who did not attend Fete Week celebrations. "Our magnificent Empire requires constant supervision to ensure order and safety for all citizens," Pradeux said. "The Emperor must often send his most trusted servants to maintain the New Order throughout the vast reaches of his Empire...even during Fete Week."

Empire Boards, Questions Free-Traders

SOMAVVA, CYCLEA STATION: Numerous reports of Imperial intervention in commercial activities have prompted Independent Traders' Infonet to issue an advisory for all free-traders traveling the more remote regions of the Outer Rim. Spacers are cautioned against using lesser-known hyperspace routes where they are likely to be suspected of working for the Rebel Alliance.

Several free-traders have been apprehended and questioned by Imperial forces patrolling isolated areas within the Outer Rim. Those who were released after interrogation claim they ran into several Imperial Star Destroyers while visiting usually quiet, out-of-the-way systems. These Star Destroyers are reportedly elements of Admiral Ozzel's Death Squadron charged with rooting out and obliterating any trace of the Rebel Alliance. No one is certain whether they've seen the entire task force, which is rumored to include an undisclosed number of Star Destroyers and one of the new Super Star Destroyers, the Executor, recently launched from Kuat's massive shipyards.

Survivors corroborate stories that Imperial forces are systematically seeking any signs of the Alliance. The boarding actions take place under the pretense of standard Imperial Customs procedures. This is nothing unusual, since that office is not well-represented in some Outer Rim systems. The Imperial Navy has long served as a commerce inspection organization in areas where Imperial Customs cannot effectively operate without substantially more power. During questioning, it is revealed that the Empire is looking for Rebel spies or cargoes destined for Alliance bases.

The growing number of these incidents is disturbing, as is the surprisingly aggressive firepower behind such boardings. The appearance of a Star Destroyer task force does not bode well for the more backwater regions. An increased Imperial presence in the Outer Rim could slow free-trader activities and adversely affect the economies of settlements dependent on such commerce.

Kooroo Shrine Mystery Uncovered

By Andor Javin

BOZTROK, THOKISL: After a whirlwind tour of several shrines of Kooroo throughout the Outer Rim, your determined newsnet investigator, Andor Javin, has unraveled the mystery of these ancient monuments. What seem to be primitive temples are in truth archaic communication devices established by a long-dead species of scouts who explored our branch of the universe millions of years ago.

The shrines consist of a central sanctuary built from native stone. They are round, and often include a central dome, sometimes supported by several columns. The inner chamber is always dome-shaped, with a pedestal at center and a low step around the perimeter. From these

innermost chambers ancient scouts transmitted reports back to their homeworld. Most of these inner sanctums are easily accessible, although some can only be reached through booby-trapped passages.

A series of carved stone obelisks radiate out from the central shrine at evenly spaced intervals. Each obelisk is inscribed with a series of runes—strange, since the shrines themselves contain very few markings at all. These “spokes” leading from the sanctuary suggest the outline of a primitive comm transmission dish, or perhaps even an archaic natural energy-gathering device.

Shrines of Kooroo have been uncovered on several Outer Rim worlds, including Haftrin, Gelgelaar, Branteez, Sufezz, and Boztrok. By carefully studying the placement of shrines and the movement of various astrographical bodies, it might be possible to pinpoint the scouts' homeworld and send an archaeological expedition.

Your intrepid reporter recently concluded his tour of shrines by visiting the sanctuary on Boztrok. My host was the Hutt art collector Prebda Thok, who owns one of the most valuable properties on the planet. The shrine was located on his exclusive island estate, where numerous bodyguards and soldiers escort dedicated pilgrims of Kooroo to and from the ruin each day. The inner sanctum consists of a central domed chamber, with a raised step along the perimeter where pilgrims sit and meditate. The island is not terribly large—though it is the biggest in the inhabitable archipelago which forms much of Boztrok starport. Unfortunately, no carved obelisks were discovered on the island, although I believe these monuments to be submerged beneath the surrounding ocean.

The modern-day Fellowship of Kooroo has few connections to the ancient scouts who constructed the shrines.

The secretive group has never made its doctrine public—we do know that followers venerate the shrines as signs or relics from their spiritual leader, Kooroo. These blue-robed pilgrims travel the Outer Rim, visiting these sanctuaries and meditating within their confines. Members seek the “enlightenment of Kooroo,” which many believe to be telepathic powers. Some think the shrines help sharpen natural telepathic ability. Perhaps the primitive scouts did not use the shrines to store technical comm equipment, but to heighten their own mental capability to send messages across space. Who knows how many more of these ancient communication devices remain to be discovered in the wastelands, jungles and overgrown savannas of numerous Outer Rim worlds?

A Very Special Meal

Master Chef Tavvar Va'ran was nervous. It was a busy night at the Manarai, and he had many orders to fill. He was the second-best Kubaz chef in the Empire — of course, few knew that the best Kubaz chef was on the Emperor's personal staff. Most of the time, Master Chef Va'ran was only responsible for the fine culinary delights which graced the Manarai's tables. Tonight he would be responsible for murder.

Tavvar stood quietly, kneading his hands in a spare wipe-cloth, listening to the human female standing across the prep table from him. By human standards she was gorgeous, but the Kubaz chef found her unappealing for he knew the black heart that lurked beneath the beautiful features. Still, she was part-owner of the Manarai and his master ... in fact, she had personally hired him. It was a debt she never let him forget.

Tavvar knew if he were not cooperative, Guri would have no qualms about eliminating him and encouraging the Manarai's management to elevate the third best Kubaz chef in the galaxy to his position. He listened attentively.

"You are preparing a course for Fendrilon Koozar, yes?" she asked coolly.

"Yes," Tavvar replied. He had heard of Koozar, one of the Emperor's Advisors who had an alarming habit of poking his nose where it wasn't welcome. "He has ordered an appetizer of raw Wroonian flycatcher filet, followed by a bowl of sufar greens topped with mecolar briddlings and drezzle sauce, then a main dish of fleek-eel broiled in zaffa oil. He has not yet placed his order for dessert."

Guri gave him a disparaging look. He knew she was well-trained in proper etiquette and culture, but it seemed she had a distaste for the high tastes Koozar often treated himself to. "You will ensure he

is given the 'house special,'" she said.

Tavvar's snout wrinkled in an odd grimace. The term was a code. It was a combination of ingredients, some natural food seasonings, others nearly untraceable chemicals. They would be added to a victim's dishes throughout the meal. These components were designed to work in conjunction with natural oils and spices found within the meal, as well as with the victim's own digestive system, to cause certain unpleasant effects several hours after consuming the meal — often resulting in the victim's rather painful death.

"Do you have any particular preparation instructions you would like me to follow?" Tavvar asked.

"I am looking for something discreet, as always," Guri said. "Perhaps a recipe to induce hallucinatory effects later on — something that might prompt him to open his speeder door and leap out, or jump from his tower balcony."

Tavvar mentally ran through chemical combinations, spices, elements in Koozar's food, and his knowledge of human physiology. A dose of tasteless thetametabuterin in the flycatcher filet, a hybrid mold on the greens briddlings, and some collafa spice in the zaffa oil should do the trick, he thought.

"It will be done according to your orders," Tavvar said. It didn't make much difference. Guri still stood there — she would keep her watch until the entire meal had been prepared and served. So Tavvar began his culinary work.

The next evening Tavvar saw on the newsnets that Fendrilon Koozar, while in his luxury airspeeder, had thrown an uncontrollable fit at his droid pilot, wrested the controls from the automaton, and slammed his craft into the Ministry of Land Management, perishing in a fiery explosion.

Imperial Advisor Golthan Leaves Court

CORUSCANT, IMPERIAL CITY: After meeting with Emperor Palpatine last week, Imperial Advisor Bregius Golthan departed from Coruscant to return to his sanctuary on Voktunma. The Emperor recently returned from the Deep Core, where he was attending to important affairs of state. His meeting with Golthan was among the first audiences he granted, though it is unclear whether Palpatine summoned his Advisor or Golthan requested the meeting himself.

Imperial Advisor Alec Pradeux assured Court observers that Golthan is not suffering from ill health, as had been suggested by some news sources. "The Emperor has charged Advisor Golthan with overseeing security within the Colonies and the Core Worlds," Pradeux said. "My esteemed colleague is returning to Voktunma to examine how best to protect the welfare, property and livelihood of every citizen while improving the quality of life we enjoy." These duties officially rest within the purview of the Minister of Security—Pradeux noted that Golthan's role was clearly supervisory in relation to the Ministry.

While Pradeux did not elaborate on the cause for the appointment, sources within the Court suggested such actions are precautions against Rebel terrorist threats. Some claim Golthan plans to meet with high-level strategists from all military branches to assess the situation and make plans to increase security at key military installations and population centers. Such areas could include the Kuat shipyards on the edge of the Core Worlds, repulsorlift and walker production facilities on Kelada in the Colonies, and the agricultural cooperatives on Salliche and the systems administered by the Salliche Ag Corporation.

Although his current role is to ensure security, Golthan has been a staunch supporter of the Emperor's aggressive campaign to crush the Rebel Alliance. Golthan rarely emerges at the forefront of Court maneuvering; however, his iron grip is rumored to be controlling or influencing several factions with various strategies for hunting down the Rebels. He has discreetly backed those Court factions urging military action against the terrorist group.

Galladinium Contraband Headed for Spirva Sector

CORUSCANT NODE: Attention free-traders! Grab your Galladinium Datalog, stock up on weapons and self-defense products, and head for the Spirva sector.

Moff Shinda recently placed the catalog on a sector-wide contraband list, and has ordered Imperial Customs and local law enforcement offices to seize any Galladinium shipments headed for his sector. Apparently some of the local street gangs, criminal organizations and terrorist groups have been ordering, modifying and using Galladinium equipment to harass Imperial forces, escalate local conflicts, and cause general mayhem. Although reports indicate these riotous factions are lawless and unorganized, your friends at Cynabar's believe several larger groups are backed by the Rebel Alliance, as well as key criminal organizations who shall remain anonymous.

As with any prohibition, Moff Shinda's actions have opened up some lucrative opportunities for independent entrepreneurs. Buyers in Spirva sector are willing to pay top credit for weapons and self-defense products from the Galladinium Datalog. Ranged weapons are preferred: blasters, rifles, and slugthrowers. Find a good supplier within Galladinium's massive distribution bureaucracy. Practically anyone with a legitimate captain's accredited license and a ship's operating license can qualify as a wholesale shipper with Galladinium—and get their substantial dealer incentive discounts.

Once you've brought the goods into Spirva sector, you can expect to sell your stock at 150 percent of Galladinium's Datalog price. Be careful, though. Distinguish between small-time customers and more solidly funded clientele. You don't want to be stuck in the sector with a load of Prax Arms projectile hunting rifles and a buyer with no credits.

Perhaps the most sought-after items are the gladiator walkers from the datalog's "recreation" section—although we don't advocate trying to smuggle anything that big under the Moff's nose. The heavy-hitters in Spirva sector's conflicts have modified what gladiator walkers they could get with more powerful blasters and upgraded armor. Rumors say the reason for Moff Shinda's prohibition stems from a confrontation between some Imperial Customs troopers and some criminal thugs in modified gladiator walkers. Guess we don't need to tell you who stomped away from that skirmish alive.

Sharp speculators will wait a few weeks before they start smuggling in first aid supplies and medical equipment from the datalog.

Crimson Bounty

"Blast you, Kaj Nedmak!" Crimson shouted, drenched in sweat. Red curls were matted against her forehead and her eyes stung with tears.

A shot whipped past her starfighter. Crimson grasped the ship's controls with both hands and banked sharply to port. "Is this what I get for helping a friend? I guess I'll never learn!" Breaking to starboard, she shouted, "You got me into this mess! You and your gambling debts-paying off Rass, double-crossing Bwahl! If you're still alive... " She paused just long enough to throw the Y-wing into a diving roll, desperately attempting to outmaneuver her pursuer "... I'll kill you myself!"

Another shot rocked her craft. Behind her, the bounty hunter's freighter mirrored her every move. Laser fire arced across the black void of deep space, momentarily invisible against the backdrop of Ord Simres before it pounded her starboard bow.

"I'll never forgive you for this, Kaj, " she said softly. Guiding the ship into a 180-degree turn, Crimson locked her laser cannons on continuous fire. She set the Y-wing on a ramming course and bore down on her attacker. In a few seconds, it would all be over.

Her adversary's ship rapidly filling the screen. Crimson whispered silent good-byes to anyone who had ever meant anything to her, as her vision narrowed and consciousness ebbed away....

* * *

"You know, Red, the problem with you is that you have such narrow vision. "

Celia "Crimson" Durasha turned in her co-pilot's chair, arms crossed defensively, the fire in her eyes matching the fiery red of her hair. "So we're back to that? Can't think of anything more original to say, so you insult my vision? That's so typical. Kaj. So blasted typical. " She rubbed her knotted legs wearily; fixing the damaged thrust manifold had taken all day, and this argument- not the first she and her Corellian partner had had in the past few days-did not help her soreness any. "Well, my vision works just fine, thank you, and right now I'm looking at a man who's walking face first into trouble. " She turned back to look him in the eye. "And don't call me 'Red. ' You know I hate that. "

Kaj Nedmak smiled a toothy grin at his partner, kicking back in the custom bantha-leather pilot's seat of their YT-2400 freighter, the Tryan Kajme. "Trouble? Ahh, I'm not worried about Bwahl. It's just one cargo. We can pay him back eventually. Have some faith!"

"Eventually... ' See, there you go again, Kaj. You never take anything seriously, and I always pay the price. When Bwahl comes looking for his money, he's not gonna care whether or not I had anything to do with your little scheme-he'll just kill us both, take the ship, and be done with it. That's what my 'vision' tells me. "

"Well, maybe you need glasses, then. "

"That's not funny, and you're avoiding the issue. "

Exhaling loudly. Kaj planted his hands on his knees. "Look, Red-" At her narrowed stare, his expression softened. Gently, he took her hand into his. "Crimson, I'm not trying to avoid any issue here. I just tend to look at things more optimistically than you do, that's all. Things'll work out fine-trust me. "

Crimson snorted, but some of the ire had left her voice. Standing, she stretched her legs. "I do trust you, Kaj. I wouldn't have stuck around as your partner for two years now if I didn't trust you. But this isn't a matter of trust, and it's about time you faced the facts. You're taking a big risk here with both our lives-when Bwahl finds out what really happened to that gun shipment, he's gonna be madder than a hungry rancor. No, I take that back-it'd be easier to face a hungry rancor. You're underestimating him if you think he's going to buy our 'pirate' story at face-value. We need to re-think this. "

"Ah, he'll buy it. Bwahl the Hutt's no fool-he won't want to miss out on a chance to make back his money with interest. At heart, he's a businessman. "

"A businessman with a reputation for killing anyone who double-crosses him... "

"Who's double-crossing him?"

"... Whom you've already managed to tork off, not too long ago... "

"That's all in the past. Crimson. I'm sure Bwahl's forgotten all about the Gordian Reach by now!"

"... Who's way too smart not to realize you're lying to him. "

"He'll get his money eventually. When this is all over, he gets paid, Rass gets paid, you live, I live, everyone's happy, no harm done!"

She fixed him with a pointed stare. "What if he doesn't see it that way?"

"Well, then, we'll just have to navigate that asteroid field when we get to it, won't we?"

"Yeah, well, I don't want to end up debris in that field. Kaj, so you'd better top your record for talking your way out of a bad spot when we get to Yefowr. "

* * *

The spaceport at Taskeed was bustling with traffic, yet some-how seemed as dark and foreboding as the black sands of the Wasted Plains that bordered it. Shadows embraced streets where the unsuspecting might meet with deadly surprises. Yefowr, similar to smuggler havens like Mos Eisley, Soco-Jarel, or Nar Shaddaa, was not a safe place to visit unless one knew what one was getting into.

Paying the dock-master a slew of fees they barely had enough credits to cover, Kaj and Crimson walked to a halfway respectable-looking cantina, the Saber's Tooth. They took seats at a booth in the back, where they'd been instructed to wait. A strong essence of carababba tabac hung in the room, mixed with the stale odor of numerous intoxicants. Crimson noticed various games of chance in progress: sabacc, Nierer's folly, two-hand, even dootch. None of those games appealed to her, though; card and dice games somehow just never held her interest for long, much to Kaj's annoyance as an avid sabacc player. Holo gameboards were another matter... oh, to be back on Vorzyd 5 for a game of Cosmic Chance!

Now was not the best time to be thinking about games. Crimson reminded herself as Kaj tapped her foot and nodded almost imperceptibly toward the back door. Few would have even seen his gesture, but they'd grown quite accustomed to each other's body language- perhaps a bit more accustomed than either was willing to admit-and she knew immediately what it meant: stay sharp... now the fun begins.

Through the shadows of the wide door stepped two Elomin and a Weequay who stared silently at the seated smugglers. None of them were visibly armed, but Crimson had no doubt that all of them could produce any number of deadly weapons at a moment's notice. A minute later, a large hoversled glided into the room, upon which sat the revolting, heaving mass that was Bwahl the Hutt.

Repugnant even by Hutt standards. Bwahl was missing one eye and had a sickly gray pallor to his unctuous skin that gave him the appearance of being made of clay.

Bwahl and his three bodyguards approached the table. Crimson, following Kaj's lead, stood slowly. The Hutt looked them both over, sizing up Crimson's curves as his tongue wagged hungrily. She felt nauseated but forced herself to put it aside.

Kaj frowned, shifting his stance and positioning himself protectively between Crimson and the giant slug. Able to speak Hutttese with some proficiency, he greeted Bwahl in his native language.

"Kaj!Mal shoda, mi buki!" The Hutt's raspy, bass voice reverberated around the room.

Kaj changed to Basic so Crimson could follow the context of the conversation. "You, too, Bwahl. We're here to pick up the, uh... shipment, as requested. "

"Ba naska po feda tos numa wenghi!"

"Ah, clearances ain't a problem-already taken care of that. "

"Nerola datcha Tammuz-an. "

"Tammuz-an? Well, I don't know why you'd be interested in a dirt-patch like Tammuz-an, but hey, your call. I can have'em there in two days, three tops. "

"Wanani no dulce Torqua-na!"

Kaj's jaw tightened. "Hey, now that wasn't my fault! Who knew the Empire would decide to blockade the Gordian Reach? There was no way to get to Torque. You shoulda told me-"

"Bal forta meecha koj?"

Crimson drew in a breath, realizing Kaj's mistake. Luckily Kaj realized it, too. "Uh, no... no, of course not-my fault completely Should have checked my clearances before arrival, you're right. Won't happen like that this time, don't you worry. "

"Kal navu boska! Trory na. " As Bwahl turned to leave, Hutt laughter filled the room, joined by chortles from his underlings. The Weequay indicated for them to follow, which they did.

"What was that last thing he said?" Crimson whispered.

Kaj's eyes were set on the Hutt hoversled heading out to the dock. "He said. 'I'm not the one who should be worried. You are. '"

"I told you this was a mistake, Kaj. "

For once, Kaj Nedmak had no snappy answer for her.

An hour later, the Tryan Kajme lifted off from Taskeed, its hold filled with an assortment of blaster parts, spare power packs, glow-cutters, vibroblades, and other weapons.

From her co-pilot's chair, Crimson turned to Kaj. "Okay, now what?"

"Now we set a course for Tammuz-an. I'm sure Bwahl is tracking us, and this way he'll think we're delivering the weapons there, as planned. "

Crimson pursed her lips, nervously shaking her head. "You know, this is gonna take us a good deal out of the way. Kaj- Tammuz-an is nowhere near Ord Mantell. "

Hoping to lay her fears to rest, Kaj gently placed his hand atop hers. "We're not going all the way to Tammuz-an-just far enough to fool Bwahl's tracking sensors. Once out of range, I'll turn this ship for Ord Mantell so we can make the rendezvous with our old friend Rass. " When she didn't answer, he turned to his navicomputer and punched in the necessary coordinates. Crimson eyed her partner skeptically, refusing to let on that his plan just might work. "Some day, Kaj, one of these schemes of yours is gonna backfire, and when it does. I hope I'm not there to see it. " A hint of amusement betrayed the corner of her mouth. He grinned back at her. "Well, that makes two of us, then. "

* * *

Arriving at Ord Mantell an hour before their meeting with Rass, the smugglers visited the Nobody's Inn for some cold raava. Most tables had built-in game boards, either holographic or manual. Noticing Crimson's interest in the games, Kaj laughed. "I just don't know what it is with you and boardgames, Crimson. If you ask me, you need to play a real smuggler's game. "

"Like sabacc? If I recall, it was your obsession with that particular real game that got us into this mess in the first place. "

"Hey, I had a bad night, okay? It happens. I had a possible Idiot's Array going there until some nerf-herder with a skifter produced a Three of Flasks and cleaned me out. I couldn't prove the guy was cheatin', and Rass covered my bets. It's not like that usually happens. "

"No, not at all. Usually, you don't even come close to winning. "

Kaj threw his hands up in submission. Crimson caught herself watching him from the corner of her eye, noticing the stark difference between him and Adion Lang. They were different, and yet there was something about Kaj's bravery, his cockiness, that reminded her of the man she'd once loved. Maybe when this mess is all over, she told herself.

* * *

Rass M'Guy was a massive individual, well aware that his bulk intimidated others. Still, despite his size, he was not a brute. A con man, loan shark, thief, and smash-and-grab man, yes-he was all of those things, and this had made him a top player in the criminal underworld in recent years. But he was still a man with style his creed that toil and enjoyment should be combined whenever feasible.

Thus it was that, when Kaj Nedmak called to arrange to pay his old debt, Rass opted to meet them in Ord Mantell's ritziest flanth-house, the Grass Hutt.

As they entered the eatery, checking their blasters and vests at the door, Crimson and Kaj spotted Rass at a table in the back already devouring a broiled flanth steak with sauteed balk a greens and giviots. Oddly enough, he was unaccompanied. Without waiting to be seated, Kaj sauntered to Rass' table, a box under his arm. Warily, Crimson followed.

"Ah, Nedmak, please have a seat. " Rass said, then spied Crimson behind him and stood. "And you, my dear, please join us as well. 'Mak and I have some business to take care of, but I think you'll find the food here unparalleled. " He smiled appraisingly at her, and she recalled Bwahl's leering gaze with distaste.

"Thanks, but I'm not hungry. " She and Kaj took seats at the table.

"Very well. But excuse me for eating in front of you-I haven't eaten in almost two hours, and I'm starving. " He lifted a fork full of giviots to his mouth, then noticed the box on the table and dropped the fork, reaching for a blaster with amazing speed for a man his size. "What is this, 'Mak? You tryin' somethin' on me?"

Startled by Rass' abrupt change. Crimson silently questioned the intelligence of checking their blasters at the door.

Carefully. Kaj replied, "No stunt. Just a sample. "

Rass did not lower his weapon. "A sample of what?"

"Let me show you, " Kaj said, reaching to open the box. In the next second, three distinct clicks told the smugglers that Rass was not, in fact, unaccompanied. Turning slowly. Kaj saw three brawny humans with blasters trained on him, the safeties off. "Hey, guys, take it easy. I'm just repayin' yer boss what I owe him. " Blasters still trained on him, he slowly opened the box and turned it so Rass could view its contents. Inside the box was a small sampling of the weapons they'd been hired to take to Tammuz-an.

Rass hefted a blaster barrel from the box, scrutinized its craftsmanship, estimated its range, then studied a glow-cutter and BlasTech power pack. "Not bad quality. Not bad at all. " He set them down again, looked the smugglers over for a moment, and then nodded to his entourage who pocketed their blasters and retreated out of sight. "Okay, "Mak, whatta ya' got?"

Kaj smiled that infuriating grin of his, crossed one leg over the other knee, and spread his hands out in an open gesture. "Well, Rass, I happen to be sitting on an entire hold full of these little troopers, all of them in excellent shape, none of them traceable back to their original source. Consider them your payment. "

"Consider them your interest, " Rass corrected him, popping a grizzled chunk of flanth in his mouth.

Kaj sat up sharply. "Interest? Are you crazy? I said I got an entire hold full of these things, just outside!"

"And I said 'interest. ' You owe me a lot of money, 'Mak, and my interest rates compound daily. By all rights. I should kill you, and If you were anyone else, I would've long ago. However, I like you, and so I'm cutting you a deal. The weapons you brought me will cover all interest up until two weeks from today, which is how long you have to get me the principal. After that, well.... "

Kaj said nothing, and Crimson just shook her head, getting no enjoyment out of seeing her partner's carefully laid plans go to poodoo.

Smiling, Rass called over a Gamorrean waiter. "Look at it this way, friends-it's so much more civilized than a carbonite bath, and a good deal more pleasant for you. I should think. Ah, waiter, please bring these two a plate each of this excellent flanth. Thank you. " He turned back to his stone-faced dinner companions. "You really will enjoy it. I promise-the food here is simply exquisite. " Locking eyes with Kaj, he stabbed a balka green and said, "Consider it a gift. "

* * *

Crimson glanced sidelong at her partner as the Tryan Kajme rose into the star-filled skies above Ord Mantell's spaceport. He'd said nothing since their meeting with Rass. While Rass's cronies had unloaded their "interest payment" at the clocking bay. Kaj remained unusually pensive, avoiding her gaze the entire time. She wasn't sure if she should be angry or frightened.

Finally, Kaj let out a long, slow breath. "Set course for Yefowf."

Crimson's eyes widened. "Yefowf? Are you crazy? We can't go back there. Might as well walk into a Sarlacc pit if you're gonna do that. Let's head to Nar Shaddaa. We can pick up a few spice runs there, get the creds we need for both Bwahl and Rass-"

Shaking his head, he placed a hand gently on her arm and replied with disarming calmness. "It's gonna take more than a few spice runs to pay both of 'em off. "

"You have a better idea?"

Kaj turned to stare at her, his dark eyes a portrait of uncharacteristic vulnerability. Leaning over the armrest on his pilot's chair, he shifted close enough that she could feel his warm breath on her face. Crimson's heart beat faster. She wanted to move away but found herself drawn toward him. What harm would it do-for only a little while-to forget the dire straits they were in?

She closed her eyes as his lips gently brushed hers. He pulled away slowly, his fingers moving across her cheek. Crimson smiled and opened her eyes. She noticed the intense look on Kaj's face. But his next question was not what she'd expected:

"What would you think if I told you I wanted to start running guns for the Rebel Alliance?"

Crimson's smile disappeared abruptly. A lead weight tugged at her heart. Shaking her head slowly, she whispered. "Don't. "

Kaj reached back toward her, tilting her chin slightly so he could see her face. "What's wrong?"

Crimson swallowed the lump in her throat. "My dearest friend in the galaxy was caught smuggling goods and information to the Alliance. " A single tear glazed her cheek. "I tried to help him and ended up on the Empire's Wanted List myself. "

Kaj gently wiped away her tear then took her hand into his. "So that's how you ended up in the Oasis, " he said, recalling where they'd first met. "What happened to your friend?"

"He's dead, " Crimson said, her voice sad yet tinged with anger. "Kaileel tried to sell me his "good cause, " his Rebellion, and I almost bought into it. But what did it get him? He died

and nobody cared. " Pulling away from Kaj, she glared out the viewport. "What good is any cause where you end up risking your life? Or losing the people you love most?"

"What people?" Kaj asked.

"Forget it, " she replied curtly, wishing she could sweep the painful memories away forever. But in the back of her mind she knew that would never happen. How could she forget the brother who died at Ralltiir, the father she hadn't spoken to in years, the lover who served the Empire and killed her best friend?

"I'm sorry about your friend, Crimson. Really, I am. But I don't plan on dying just yet. And 'good causes' have nothing to do with it. Maybe it's wrong not to have such high and mighty ideals, but you know us free-traders... we work where the credits are. "

"Credits? The Rebels have credits?" she asked sarcastically.

"That's news to me. "

"Well, maybe not so much now. But I have a gut feeling the Empire is headed toward supernova, if ya' know what I mean. I wanna be on the right side when all's said and done. And the right side for me is the side that pays. "

Suddenly, the Kajme shook violently.

"Stang!" Kaj shouted. His hands and eyes raced across the ship's controls.

"Three Headhunters coming in at zero-nine-zero, " Crimson reported as another shot raked the ship. She looked up. "It's Bwahl. "

"Can't be. "

"Who else could it be?" Crimson asked. "You have some other old debts you forgot to mention to me?"

"No, " Kaj said defensively, "no other debts. "

"Bwahl had us followed, " Crimson said matter-of-factly as red lights blinked harshly on her nav panel. An alarm blared and she reached to turn it off as the ship took a third hit. "There's a fourth ship out there, too, coming in behind those starfighters. A Y-wing. Oh, and that last hit just took down our starboard shields. "

Breaking the Tryan Kajme hard to port. Kaj guided the freighter toward open space. "Can't be Bwahl. Can't be, " he repeated, his concentration focused on a readout from the navicomputer. "Stand by. Five seconds to hyperspace. "

Kaj pulled back on the hyperdrive, but the familiar lines of the jump to hyperspace never materialized. Crimson shook her head as Kaj cursed. Fire burned in his eyes. "No one's adding my name to the history texts. Not yet, " he said calmly as the ship took another hit. "Extra power to the forward deflectors. "

"What?"

"Just do it!" he said, maneuvering the ship in a tight overhead loop that brought it face-to-face with their attackers.

"We've got power on the front end. " Crimson replied as Kaj opened fire. Laser blasts from the Tryan Kajme streaked through the darkness. One Z-95 took a hit and burst into a ball of flames.

"One down!" Kaj exclaimed.

"Uh, Kaj, we've got a leak in-" Another powerful blast nearly threw Crimson from the co-pilot's seat.

"Hold on! We're going down!" Kaj shouted.

"Down? Down where?"

"Back to Ord Mantell-"

"This bucket's gonna crack apart before we get back to the spaceport, Kaj. " Crimson shouted above the blaring alarms as more shots flew past the viewport.

"We can make it to the plateau. "

"The old stellar-energy station?"

"That's the place. "

"There's nothing there, Kaj!" Crimson yelled as her partner banked the ship sharply to port.

"Sure there is!" Kaj insisted. "We can find salvage materials to repair the ship. "

"Yeah, right, " Crimson replied. "If there's anything left to repair. " She studied the dozen lights blinking before her. "Rear deflectors aren't gonna hold much longer. Kaj. Better get us on the ground, quick. "

"Hold on tight, Crimson. This won't be pretty. "

Thick black cumulus clouds covered Ord Mantell's rough back country. Lightning crackled through the clouds like a whip: bursts erupted staccato-fashion one after another, illuminating the Tryan Kajme in an eerie whitish glow. Caught in violent wind currents, the ship rocked as it plummeted through the skies.

Sweat poured from Kaj's face as he fought to maintain control.

"Well, where is it?" Crimson asked.

"If sensors are still working, we should practically be on top of it," Kaj replied. "Initiate the landing cycle."

Crimson, surprised her hands weren't shaking, deftly ran them across a half dozen buttons. "Stang!" she yelled. "One of the landing struts is jammed!"

"Too late now! Here we go!"

Kaj gripped the controls tightly as the freighter touched down, bounced off the pockmarked landing strip a couple of times, then tipped its nose to the ground before skidding to a halt. A Headhunter whooshed overhead, strafing the ship as Kaj and Crimson opened the hatch and ran for cover inside the abandoned energy station. Behind them, the second Headhunter and the Y-wing landed.

"Split up!" Kaj shouted as blaster fire ripped the air between them.

Crimson ran down a darkened corridor and heard Kaj's footsteps fade in the opposite direction. Shots rang out in the distance. Crimson stopped, pressing herself against a wall as she pulled her DL-44 from its holster. Ready to greet the enemy, she listened for signs of pursuit, forcing herself to take several long, deep breaths. Her heart was pounding.

There were muted voices in the distance, sounds of a scuffle, voices shouting, and more blaster fire. Then, suddenly, dread silence filled the night.

Crimson swallowed the lump in her throat. Kaj!

"What about the girl?" she heard someone call out.

The response was unintelligible. No footsteps tread in Crimson's direction. And within a few moments there was the unmistakable sound of two ships departing. Unconvinced they'd left without her, Crimson remained rooted in place for nearly an hour. Finally, she decided their attackers were gone and cautiously ventured out to determine what had happened to Kaj.

She took in her surroundings. The storm had stopped. The ruins of a great steel-and-plastone factory loomed before her, dilapidated and overgrown with mosses and lichens.

Silent save for a few distant hoots and cries, the area seemed devoid of life. The remains of a loading crane extended from one side of the building, ending abruptly over a craggy ridge, next to which sat the smoldering, cracked freighter she'd shared with Kaj.

She walked toward the ship, then stopped and drew in a sharp breath. Beyond the wrecked crane, not more than six meters past the final resting spot of the equally wrecked freighter, the ridge fell away into a steep, mountainous chasm.

She couldn't see the bottom.

A chill pricked her nerves as she realized how close Kaj's blind landing had come to making them a permanent part of the beautiful rocky terrain.

Shaking, Crimson picked through the wreckage of the ship, but the comm system and sensors were all dead. It's amazing we even lived... she realized with a shudder... assuming Kaj is still alive. She noticed a jagged crack that ran the length of the outer hull of the freighter. Salvaging this hunk of debris was probably out of the question.

Well, Tryan Kajme... looks like you've finally been caught.

At the clang of hard boots on metal, she instinctively whipped around, blaster in hand. A tall, thin, muscular woman with close-cropped blonde hair stood at the entranceway to the station. She wasn't conventionally attractive, but had the fit-looking physique of an athlete, of someone used to hard work. But it was her blaster-holstered from a thin soldier strap—that made Crimson nervous.

The other raised her hands deferentially. "Hey, relax, I'm not going to hurt you. " she said in an even, controlled voice. "I'm not the enemy. "

Uncertain. Crimson kept her blaster leveled. The woman made no move for her own weapon.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" Crimson asked. "This station's been abandoned for years. "

"Thune. " the woman replied. "And you are... ?"

"I'm the one asking questions, and so far, you've only answered one of them. "

Thune silently eyed her. "All right. I was looking through the ruins. When I heard all the noise, I thought someone had spotted me and I came out to check. "

A scav? Crimson's eyes narrowed. Most scavs she'd known had a look of desperation about them, borne of the hard times that had driven them to scavenging. Thune looked too clean, too self-assured, for the role. Crimson said nothing, kept the blaster trained.

Slowly, the woman lowered her hands but didn't reach for her blaster. "Would you mind stowing the gun?"

"Why, so you can shoot me?"

"No, because I don't like having blasters pointed at me. One nervous twitch and I'm livin' with the Jedi. " Sensing Crimson's uncertainty, she added, "Look, you can see I'm armed-if I'd wanted you dead, I'd have shot you in the back before you even knew I was here. "

The truth of Thune's words unnerved Crimson. She was right. But was it worth the risk? Right now. Crimson was Kaj's only chance for survival. And it seemed that this scav might be her only way to leave the plateau. She decided to trust the woman. For now. Thune smiled as the blaster lowered.

"Thanks. " She looked past Crimson. "Nice ship. A shame you had to scut her. She's not going anywhere. "

Letting out a breath held too long, Crimson leaned against the dead freighter. "Yeah, well, neither am I, apparently. "

"What happened out here?"

Unsure of her companion. Crimson decided to be sparse with details. "Pirates. Opened fire at us as we neared escape velocity. Caught us unaware. Hit our stabilizer. "

"Us?" Thune indicated the freighter. "Someone else in there? Are they hurt?"

Crimson winced at the slip. "Just me and my ship. I tend to think her as a partner. "

Thune nodded. "I understand. Me and the Faceted, we've been together for a lot of years, and if I ever lost her, it'd be like losing a friend. "

"Where's your ship?"

"Hidden. "

"Listen, I have two hundred credits on me. That's all I have.

They're yours if you'll take me back to the spaceport. "

"Two hundred... that's not much for a ride these days, you know. "

"Well, like I said, it's all I have. Is it a deal?"

Thune considered, then nodded and started walking around the building. "Done. Follow me. " She stopped short and turned. "One thing, first.... "

Crimson tensed.

"... What's your name?"

Crimson considered lying, but decided not to bother. "Crimson. "

"Nice to meet you. Especially now that you don't have a blaster trained on me. Come-my ship's around the bend. "

* * *

The YT-1300 freighter Faceted had clearly been highly modified in its lifetime. Jury-rigged equipment littered the gray exterior, some recognizable as weaponry and sensory devices, others Crimson couldn't begin to identify. Too drained to ask about them, she followed the taller woman inside. A contrast to the chaotic exterior, the ship's interior was immaculate, inordinately so for a ship owned by a scav. Or a smuggler. Crimson mused, remembering how "relaxed" she and Kaj tended to let the Kajme get.

At Crimson's surprise. Thune chuckled. "Yeah, that's pretty much everyone's reaction... not that a lot of people see the inside of this ship. Luckily, I have help. "

As though on cue, a greenish-tinted droid entered the corridor from astern. A variation on the standard 3PO Human-Cyborg Relations model, the droid was slightly bulkier than its predecessor but had that same perpetually quizzical expression that had amused or annoyed so many owners over the years.

The droid raised its metal arms. "Oh, goodness gracious me! Mistress Thune, I had no idea you were taking on a visitor! I'd have straightened up! Oh, this mess is simply dreadful. You really should inform me of-"

Thune cut the droid off. "Uthre, this is Crimson. She's going to be traveling back to the spaceport with us. "

"Back to the spaceport. Mistress Thune? But I thought you-"

"Shut up. Uthre, and go check the alluvial dampers. "

"But I-"

"Go. "

Miffed, the droid complied, his voice trailing off as he headed for the cockpit. "Goodness. I simply don't know how I can be expected to function efficiently with so many changes of plans. Why. I... "

Thune shook her head as she doffed her jacket and holster. "Sometimes that blasted machine can be incredibly annoying. One of these days I'm just gonna leave him somewhere. "

Crimson laughed, having known several protocol droids in her time. "I pity you. I'd never want to own one. "

"Well, despite his fretting, U-THR is a valuable resource-he has an amazing file storage capacity and can locate whatever data I need at a moment's notice. Comes in handy in my field. "

"Your field? I thought you were a scav-that is... " Crimson's complexion approached the color of her hair. "Um, no offense. "

"None taken. I do some scavenging work, but my main line of work is the appropriation of goods without the hindrance of certain interested parties, if you follow my meaning. "

Crimson blinked. A smuggler. Like her. Thune was a smuggler. "Yeah... I think I know what you mean. "

Thune looked her in the eye. "I have a feeling you do. "

Crimson met her gaze, calculating how much to tell this woman she'd just met.

"What were they after?" Thune's direct question caught her off guard, and suddenly she felt a very strong need to tell someone- anyone-what had happened to her and Kaj. For the better part of a quarter-hour, she outlined her situation.

"Sounds to me like your friend Bwahl didn't share your partner's Perspective on the situation, " Thune noted when Crimson had finished.

Sighing, Crimson remembered the unfinished argument about gun-running for the Rebels. "No, and I'm not even sure I did, half the time. Why I even went along with his ronto-headed scheme is

Beyond me. "

"Bounty hunters have him, you know. "

Crimson looked away. "Yeah, I figured that. Bwahl said we'd soon have his reply... I guess we got it. " She rested her head on her hands. Kaj... you idiot. "I can help you get him back. "

That snapped Crimson's head up. "How? There's no way of knowing who has him, or where they took him. "

"I already told you about my valuable resource. " Thune toggled an intercom switch. "Uthre, I need you in here. "

"Coming, Mistress Thune, I-" the droid's cheerful voice was cut off as she closed contact.

"I can't pay you. I gave you the last of my credits. "

Thune merely nodded. "Don't worry about it-you seem pretty handy. You can work it off. "

With no other options, Crimson accepted the terms.

A moment later, the droid entered. "How may I help you?"

"Uthre, it seems our visitor's partner has been captured by bounty hunters-"

"Oh, dear, that's unspeakable, that's-"

"Quiet. I need you to access our database on bounty hunters known to work in this sector. " She turned to Crimson. "Through various contacts, we've been able to track the efforts of some bountymen, but not all of them. This might not tell us anything, but it's worth a try. "

"Thanks. " Crimson listened as the droid immediately spit out data.

"Skorr, Gribbet. Giles Durane, Valance. Cypher Bos-"

"Uthre. Most of them are dead. What good does a list of dead hunters do me?"

"Oh, most dreadfully sorry. Mistress. Of course, I shall limit my search parameters to those still actively seeking bounties. "

"Thank you, " Thune replied tiredly.

"Oh, you re most welcome, Mistress. " the pleased droid replied, then proceeded to list some seventeen other names, none of which had been spotted near Ord Mantell within the past month.

Crimson sank lower into her chair as each name was ruled out. "Well, that didn't help much. "

Thune turned to her and raised an eyebrow. "On the contrary, it allowed us to rule out a lot of major players in the game-Fett, Nataz, Goa, Dengar. Now that we know who it's not, it's time to figure out who it is. "

* * *

Crimson scrutinized her opponent, her emerald-green eyes narrowed. "Your move. "

U-THR studied the holo gameboard, head tilting from side to side, hand perched beneath metal chin, thumb running back and forth along his "jawline"-if Crimson didn't know better, she could almost imagine the droid was more human than mechanical.

"I must say, Mistress Crimson, you are a most skilled player. I have not had the opportunity to play against someone of your caliber since before my acquisition by Mistress Thune. "

"Thune doesn't play holo games?" Crimson asked.

"Oh, no. Mistress Thune prefers sabacc. "

Crimson chuckled. "She'd get along well with Kaj. "

"Who'd get along well with Kaj?" Thune asked, walking into the central cabin of the Faceted.

"We were talking about you and sabacc. "

Thune pursed her lips thoughtfully. For a moment. Crimson swore she detected a small measure of concern, or perhaps empathy. "You and Kaj were close?"

Crimson gazed down at the gameboard. She wasn't sure what she felt for Kaj. There was something there all right, she couldn't deny that. Was she ready to admit she might see him as more than just a business partner? She liked him... probably more than she should. But his schemes were crazy. And this latest idea of working for the Alliance... how could she risk losing someone else she loved? She looked back up, her face a stone mask. "We've... been working together for a while. "

"Do not worry, Mistress Crimson, " U-THR piped in. "Mistress Thune is an expert at tracking people; I am certain we will find your friend. "

"Expert?" Crimson asked, her eyes roving from the droid to Thune then back again.

"Indeed, " Uthre replied. "That is how I came to be in her service. My previous master, before his death at the hands of-"

"Uthre-shut up!" Thune growled.

Crimson grinned. Typical smuggler, unwilling to have the past laid out for just anyone to see, especially where questionable business dealings were involved. She understood because it had been her own creed these last two years. There had been so many things she hadn't shared yet with Kaj... Thune stared disdainfully at the droid, then turned back to

Crimson. "Sorry to interrupt your holo game, but we have a slight change in plans. We're heading to Ord Simres. "

"You've heard something?" Crimson asked.

"I was on the comm with an info broker pal of mine on Ord Mantell. There's a chance your partner was picked up by a bounty hunter named Treytis Prash. "

"But. Mistress Thune. Prash works for-"

"Quiet. Uthre, " Thune barked nastily. She laced Crimson again "Prash was last seen at the CardSafe, a fancy pub on Orel Simres. He was bragging about a bounty he was expecting from your pal Bwahl. "

"Prash? He must be the one who took Kaj!" Crimson said, hopeful for the first time in hours that she might see him alive.

"Care to join me in the cockpit?"

"Sure, " Crimson replied. Standing, she stretched her limbs. "Uthre, maybe we can finish this game later. "

"That would certainly be most delightful, Mistress Crimson. "

"Thune, I might take back what I said about protocol droids. Uthre is quite the competitor. I haven't had such a great game of B'shingh in ages. "

"Why, thank you. Mistress Crimson. I have been programmed for various levels-"

"Okay, fine, " Thune interrupted. "Uthre, check the rear deflector shield projectors. I'm getting some odd readings from them. "

"I do not understand, " Uthre said. Wandering toward the rear of the ship, he continued to mutter under his breath. "I ran a complete systems check after I corrected the problem with the alluvial dampers. They seemed perfectly all right... "

Thune rolled her eyes.

"He's not such a bad 3PO unit. Thune. " Crimson said as she followed the other woman into the cockpit. "You should be more... humane. "

"It's just a droid, Crimson, a tool. I'm the boss. He just does what I say. I don't like the idle chatter, and I'll shut him up whenever I want. "

"Okay. " Crimson shrugged and sat down in the co-pilot's seat. From the corner of her eye, she watched Thune's expert hands manipulate a dozen different controls in rapid succession. Good pilot, she thought, nearly as good as me.

* * *

Forty minutes later, the two women staked out the CardSafe on Ord Simres. Fancy? Crimson chuckled. If this was Thune's idea of fancy, she'd love to see her impression of seedy. But. Crimson had to admit, the CardSafe was four times nicer looking than the other establishments they'd sped past on their way from the nearby spaceport.

"Thune, " Crimson said, "I want to thank you again for helping me. "

"My services aren't free, remember? You agreed to work off my fee. "

"Yeah, I know. But-"

"That's him. " Thune said. "That's Prash. "

Crimson studied the suave gentleman who walked toward the cantina's entrance. He was a well-dressed human, tall with jet-black hair and muscular good looks-not at all typical of the bounty hunters she'd seen or heard about. His two companions had the look of bodyguards. The Rodian's eyes captured every movement on the streets, his hand perched lightly atop the handle of his holstered blaster, while the Krish was more blatant, swinging a very illegal BlasTech Sharpshooter V in a wide, sweeping motion.

Prash and his friends disappeared into the pub. "C'mon, " Thune said.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Crimson asked as Thune took off across the street.

"Yes, I'm sure. " Thune called back to her in that impatient tone she used so often with U-THR.

Shaking her head, Crimson took several long strides across the dimly lit avenue and caught up to her. "I don't suppose we'll be able to talk our way through this. " she said as they slowed their pace to a walk.

"It'll have to be quick and dirty. I'm afraid, " Thune replied softly. "Those two bodyguards won't mince words. Let's take them out first, then we'll talk nice with Prash. "

Crimson nodded glumly as they entered the pub. All eyes in the place were rooted on the stage, where a curvaceous female and her back-up singers crooned softly. Thune unobtrusively clicked her comlink on, whispered something into it, then clicked it off. She pulled her blaster, cocking her head toward a table near the back of the room. Crimson gripped her own DL-44 tightly and walked beside Thune.

The Krish spotted them first. As he brought his blaster rifle to bear, Thune opened fire, killing him instantly. Crimson's shot a half-second later took down the Rodian. Prash stared at the two women, his face a mixture of anger and surprise. He knew better than to reach for his own weapon.

"Where's Kaj?" Crimson half-shouted.

Prash's brow furrowed. "Who? he said.

"Kaj Nedmak, the pilot your bounty hunters captured. "

"I don't know what you're talking about, " Prash spat, his voice growing more indignant with each word. "I never heard of anyone named Kaj. I don't have any bounty hunters. And if anyone's out hunting today, I'd say it was you!"

"Quiet!" Thune barked. "Check the back room, Crimson. I'll watch this one. "

Suddenly, Prash dove toward Crimson, knocking the blaster from her hands. A shot rang out. Prash collapsed to the floor at Crimson's feet. Crimson glared at Thune. "Why'd you kill him? Now we'll never find Kaj!"

Thune shook her head and laughed. "You're too naive to be a smuggler, Red, " she said, bending to scoop up Crimson's blaster. "Besides, he's not dead. "

"What?" Crimson cried, confused and angered by Thune's attitude.

"Grab the man's arms and help me get him outside, " Thune said. Her tone was not pleasant. Her remark was an order, plain and simple. "Uthre should've brought the speeder around by now. "

"What's going on, Thune?" Crimson asked, her heart pounding as she watched her blaster disappear into Thune's loose-fitting jacket.

"You've just helped me capture one of the Rebel Alliance's leading gun-runners. There are so many Imperial bounties on Prash's head I could live like the Emperor himself and never work another day in my life. "

"Wait a minute. You're a bounty hunter? Prash was telling the truth?"

"Gettin' quick there, Red, " Thune snarled as they walked through the door. Outside, she dropped Prash's body and stared up the street impatiently until U-THR appeared in a rented OP-5. The droid hastily emerged from the landspeeder. "I was not programmed for this type of work, Mistress Thune, " Uthre complained as he helped Crimson drag Prash's body into the vehicle. "My primary function is-

"Your primary function will be sitting in a scrap heap in a minute, Uthre. Just do what I say so you don't end up in bits and pieces. "

"Of course, Mistress Thune. I was not complaining about the work, merely explaining-

"Uthre!"

"Yes?"

"Just do it!"

Crimson climbed into the speeder beside Prash's limp body. Thune sat beside U-THR, her back pressed against the door. Her body was half-twisted, facing the rear of the vehicle, her blaster pointed at Crimson's head.

"Why are you pointing that thing at me?"

"Because I know something about you, too. Something about a former cruise ship navigator who conspired to free a Rebel collaborator and viciously assaulted an Imperial officer. Oh, yes. You've got a nice bounty on your head, too, my friend. "

"You knew all along?"

Thune answered with a laugh.

"Where are we going?" Crimson asked.

"After we rendezvous with my men, I'm making a delivery to Bwahl the Hutt. "

"You're gonna turn me over to Bwahl?" Crimson's mind raced. Making a deal with Bwahl might be easier than escaping from an Imperial prison. "I didn't realize I was so popular, " she added with a smirk.

"Don't flatter yourself, Red, " Thune spat. "Bwahl couldn't care less about you, but he'll be quite pleased to see your friend Kaj. "

"Kaj?" Crimson's eyes lit up despite the seriousness of her own situation. "You have Kaj?"

"Sure do. Some 'employees' of mine have been holding him for me. Yep, a nice profitable trip for me-I get Bwahl's bounty on Kaj, then I give you and Prash to the Empire. "

As the landspeeder came to a stop beside the Faceted. Prash moaned. Crimson wondered if he felt as bad as she did. How could she have been so blind? Why had she trusted Thune so readily? To help a friend? Friendship... that's what started this whole mess to begin with. Her entire life had been turned upside down because of friendship.

Come to think of it, though, she wouldn't change a thing.

Somehow, some way, she was going to rescue Kaj. Or she would die trying.

* * *

Aboard the Faceted, Thune sent U-THR to the cockpit to prep the ship for takeoff. She bound Prash to a chair near the technical station and tied up Crimson at the gameboard. Pecking away at the communications board, she maintained a watchful eye on her prisoners.

Crimson cursed her own idiocy. How would she get out of this mess? A moan told her Prash was awake. With a cough, he took in his surroundings, looking first at Thune, then at the blaster beside her. Finally, he turned to Crimson, the venom in his eyes making her pale.

"Why?" he demanded.

Crimson just stared at him, at a loss for words.

"What do you want from me?"

"I'm sorry, " said Crimson, overwrought with guilt.

"Oh, cut the blasted melodrama, " Thune barked at them. "I need both of you alive for payment, but that doesn't mean you have to have all your limbs. So shut up. "

Prash looked from one woman to the other. "I thought you two were-"

Thune laughed.

He turned to Crimson. "Then why did you kill Beidlo and Skurvis?"

"I thought you were holding my partner, " she stammered. "I'm sorry. "

He said nothing, merely looked at her, confused and angry.

Another ship landing nearby was a welcome sound-anything to distract Crimson from the feelings of guilt that pervaded her thoughts.

"Move it, Red!" Thune growled. "Time to throw out the welcome mat. "

Thune escorted Crimson to the bottom of the Faceted's extended entrance ramp. She calculated her chances of escaping, but the binders at her wrists and the blaster at the back of her skull made her think twice.

The hatch opened on the Y-wing. A Gank hopped out of the cockpit and turned to his rear-seat passenger. Kaj! There was a brief scuffle in the cockpit, then the Gank backhanded Kaj and his struggling ceased. He bodily hauled Kaj out of the seat and threw him to the pavement. Kaj groaned, blood flowing from a gash spanning his forehead. It pained Crimson to see him like this, but there was nothing she could do.

"Bring him aboard, " Thune said, pulling Crimson back into the ship. "I don't want to attract attention. "

The Gank silently obeyed, dragging Kaj to his feet and prodding him up the ramp. Once inside, Kaj stopped short and gaped. "Crimson! What the-! Stang! They got you, too?"

Before she could answer, the Gank hit him again, knocking him to one knee. Using the fall to his advantage, Kaj yanked the Gank's legs out from under him, sending the guard sprawling down the ramp. Thune leveled her blaster on Kaj, but Crimson twisted around, her fists knotted, and landed a powerful punch. With a sharp yell and the crack of a rib Thune bent over, her shot shattering a monitor in a shower of sparks. Kaj jumped to his feet and dove at her, pinning her to the deck and grabbing her blaster. Crimson ran to his side and he severed her bonds with the blaster. She did the same for him, then turned on Thune, her voice shaking in fury. "Now, bounty hunter-I think I'll access Uthre's memory

banks and find out how many people you've sold out! Maybe I'll sell you to the victims' survivors-one piece at a time!"

Thune glared at her in pain. "You're no different than me. Durasha. You killed that Rebel in cold blood because you thought it would get your precious lover back. He stood in the way of your goal, and you murdered him, just like I would have. You, me, Lang..." she paused, gloating over the shocked look on Crimson's face, "... yes, even your old friend Lieutenant Lang dangled five thousand creds in addition to that Imperial bounty on your head! At heart, we're all the same. So you can drop the sanctimony. "

Guilt washed over Crimson, mixed with rage at the truth in Thune's words. Grabbing the blaster from Kaj, she raised it above her head so as to bring it down upon the hunter's head...

... And in the next second she rolled to the floor, nursing her burned hand and dropping the half-melted slag.

The Gank, forgotten in the struggle, stood at the doorway, a blaster leveled at the smugglers. "Step away from Captain Thune. You will not be told twice. "

Cursing, Kaj got to his feet. But as Crimson stood, she slipped her own blaster from Thune's jacket and opened fire, blowing a hole in the Gank's face-plate. He dropped out the door with an agonized, filtered scream.

Kaj hauled Thune back to her feet. "Get up, lady. I got half a mind to scrag you now. "

"Kaj, wait. " Crimson stayed his arm.

Kaj stared at her fiercely. "These scum almost sold us out for money, Crimson-do you have any idea what Bwahl would have done to me? Do you know what the Empire does to traitors? She deserves to die-you were ready to kill her yourself a moment ago!"

"I know, but there's been enough killing already. I don't want to be a party to it anymore. "

They locked eyes for a moment, then Kaj furrowed his brow and turned to Thune. "All right, you live today, bounty hunter, but don't make any long-term plans. Now, move it!"

Thune glared as he pushed her toward the cockpit. Kaj glanced back at Crimson. "I overheard the Gank speaking-his buddies will be here any second. We'll tie her up and get outta here in that Y-wing. "

"That won't work, Kaj. Too many of us. We need the Faceted. "

"You're not taking my ship-"

"Quiet, Thune, or I'll change my mind about putting you permanently out of commission, " Kaj said.

Crimson turned abruptly and led them deeper into the ship, back to the technical station. Kaj noticed Thune's other bound prisoner and raised an eyebrow. "Who's he?" he asked.

"An ally. " Crimson said, untying a confused Prash. "Treytis Prash, Kaj Nedmak. " The two men nodded uncomfortably at each other. "Look, whether or not you want to believe it, Prash, we're on the same side. Kaj and I, we... we're thinking of working for you Rebels. Come with us. " She held out her hand.

Prash stared hard at her, then stole past her, ignoring the hand. "All right, let's move. You can start by finishing what Beidlo started-delivering a shipment of blaster rifles to a Rebel base. After that... we'll see. "

"Prash, " Kaj asked, "how about keeping an eye on Thune until we get this ship outta here?"

"With pleasure, " Prash replied, taking the blaster from Kaj's outstretched hand.

Kaj and Crimson locked eyes. She smiled, nodding, and they turned toward the cockpit. But before they reached the corridor, Thune produced a knife and brought it up hard into Kaj's chest. He let out a gasp, stunned at the thick metal handle protruding from his body.

"Kaj!"

Thune reached for Prash's blaster, but Kaj managed the strength to launch himself at her. All three went down.

"Crimson, run!" Kaj yelled.

She was frozen in place, unwilling to abandon him.

"Go! I'm not gonna make it, Red!" Kaj coughed up blood, then looked down at his scarlet-stained tunic. He chuckled hoarsely. "Actually... looks like I am gonna... make it, Red... " Thune aimed a solid punch at his jaw. He ducked, pinning her to the deck, as Prash rolled away from them. "Go! Get out! I've got you covered!"

"No!"

Kaj yelled to Prash, "Get her out of here!" Prash saw the pool of blood surrounding Thune and Kaj, then grabbed Crimson's arm.

"C'mon!"

"No... " She resisted his pull.

"C'mon!" He urged again, pulling harder.

"No! Kaj!" She tried to break Prash's hold, but he dragged her out to the parked Y-wing. The engine was still running. "Blast it, let me go!"

A familiar sound filled the air, and they looked up to see a Headhunter in the distance. The sight broke through Crimson's hysteria, and she jumped into the front seat of the starfighter.

A scream behind her, however, told her Prash hadn't made it.

She turned sharply to see him roll clumsily to the ground, a smoldering hole in his back. Thune stood at the doorway, her blaster trained on Crimson. That meant Kaj was...

No! she screamed in her mind. Not again! No more!

"Get out of the ship, Durasha. " Thune's steel voice was uncompromising.

Ducking, Crimson slammed the Y-wing's hatch button and gunned the accelerator without even waiting for the click of the hatch-seals. As she blasted out of the spaceport, she opened fire on the Headhunter. The pilot would never know who'd delivered his death-blow.

Taking to the skies, she exhaled loudly. It was not over yet.

* * *

A blast from Thune's freighter rocked the Y-wing. I don't believe this! How did I get into this mess... ? Drenched in sweat, Crimson cursed her partner, his affinity for gambling, and his blasted schemes. Another shot whipped past the Y-wing.

Friendship. Ha! Why in the worlds did I decide I needed to rescue your hide, Kaj Nedmak! Why?

"If you're still alive... " she paused just long enough to take the Y-wing into a diving roll, desperately attempting to outmaneuver Thune, "... I'll kill you myself!"

Laser fire arced across the black void of deep space, momentarily invisible against the backdrop of Ord Simres before it pounded the starfighter's starboard bow. The ship shuddered and Crimson realized that the outcome of this battle was not in her favor.

"I'll never forgive you for this, Kaj, " she said softly. Guiding the ship into a 180-degree turn. Crimson locked her laser cannons on continuous fire. She set the Y-wing on a ramming course determined to take out the woman who once claimed to be a friend. In a few seconds, it would all be over.

The Faceted filled the viewport, its guns ablaze. Yellows and greens danced around the Y-wing, growing in intensity as the shields buckled. Then there was a flash inside the cockpit.

* * *

Floating...

Stars...

Red...

Bright...

Starlight...

Red

Red...

Starlight...

"Red?"

Crimson opened her eyes, disoriented. What... ? Alive... ? But- She tried to sit up, immediately wished she hadn't done so, blinding pain forcing her back down. Not just pain... a hand... metal... What... ? She opened her eyes and stared up into the quizzical face of U-THR-"Oh, thank the stars. Mistress Crimson! You're conscious! Uthre... but-that meant she was back aboard... She sat up abruptly, ignoring the pain as she scanned for Thune. The bounty hunter was seated at the tech station, facing a screen.

"All right, Thune. I-" She stopped, her attention caught by two peculiar facts.

First, Thune seemed to take no notice of her.

And second, she was tied to the chair.

"Red... "

Crimson whipped around at the raspy voice.

There, lying on a portable grav-bed, bound and bandaged, was Kaj Nedmak. Pale and bruised, his breath came out in ragged spurts.

"Kaj! You're alive? But how?"

"I... didn't expect to be... " he coughed, "but our... green-metal friend here... had other plans. "

Uthre gently placed a metallic hand on her shoulder. "Please, Mistress Crimson, you must lie back. That explosion in the cockpit left you unconscious. You must allow some recovery time before exerting yourself. "

"But what happened? How did I get aboard? Why wasn't this ship destroyed?"

"Really, Mistress, you mustn't concern yourself with that right now. Now-"

"Uthre, I need to know. Please. "

The droid looked at her, his head tilted to one side. "Very well, but then you must rest. "

"It's a deal. "

The droid explained what had happened. After Crimson escaped in the Y-wing, Thune left Kaj for dead near the freighter's tech station, headed into the cockpit, and took off in pursuit of the smaller vessel. The battle was quick, the Y-wing hopelessly outclassed. Uthre, seated at the co-pilot controls, nearly shorted out his empathy circuits watching Thune try to kill the only human to treat him as an equal since the death of his former master. Thune ordered the droid to go to the airlock and prepare for a remote docking with the starfighter-she planned to keep Crimson alive, determined to collect her bounty. Passing by the tech station, Uthre accidentally knocked a blaster toward the wounded Kaj. Kaj managed to crawl to the cockpit and shoot Thune. And luckily, Crimson blacked out before completing her ramming attempt. Kaj took the controls and moved the Faceted out of the fighter's path while Uthre bound Thune. After remotely docking the two ships. Kaj brought Crimson aboard with Uthre's help.

Crimson stared at the droid, amazed. "You did all that?"

"Why, yes-as I've often told Mistress Thune, my primary programming has never been for committing acts of unspeakable violence, hunting down fugitives, or abetting in their deaths. " Uthre paused, and Crimson swore that he almost seemed to shiver "As it happens, my primary function is to observe the practices of protocol, foster accordant communication, and above all, provide peaceful solutions to insure the preservation of sentient life. Acting as an accomplice to Mistress Thune's utterly abominable trade was beginning to degrade my ethics sub-routines. "

Crimson smiled at the droid's speech, and Kaj uttered a short raspy laugh from across the room. "Uthre, " he coughed, "you'd... make one great... smuggler. "

"Oh, Maker forbid, Master Nedmak! I do believe my ethics subroutines have taken all they can for one day-"

Crimson laid a hand on his shoulder. "Actually, Uthre, I think it's right up your alley. Don't think of it so much as smuggling as.. free-trading. "

"Free-trading?"

"Sure. You wouldn't have to do anything unethical. No violence, no killing... maybe an occasional run in with conniving dock-masters or Imperial Customs. "

"Imperial Customs, Mistress?"

Crimson threw a frown toward Kaj. "Running guns for the Rebel Alliance could get a little sticky. "

Kaj smiled, nodding weakly.

"Think about it, Uthre, " Crimson said. "But for now, how about taking your former master down to the cargo hold? We'll drop her off where she can't cause any more trouble. "

The droid wandered out of the room, his voice trailing behind him. "I simply don't understand the behavior of most humans... "

Crimson walked shakily to Kaj's side and sat on the edge of the grav-bed. She held his hand.

"So... changed your mind about... the Rebels, I see... "

"I've had some time to think, Kaj. " She tightened her grip and smiled at him. Weakly, he smiled back.

"At least... we got a... newer ship in the deal. "

"Yeah. " Crimson looked around the cabin. "She needs a new name, though. "

"How about the Uwana Buyer?"

"Naaah. It's been clone. " She thought for a moment then smiled. "I've got it. The Starlight Red"

"Starlight Red? What kind of name is that?"

"The right one. "

Kaj eyed his partner skeptically, refusing to let on that the name just might work. "Some day... Red... one of these schemes of yours is gonna... backfire, and when it does, I... hope I'm not there... to see it." A hint of amusement betrayed the corner of his mouth.

She laughed at having her words thrown back at her. "Well, that makes two of us, then."

Small Favors

He stood absolutely still in front of the viewport, returning the unblinking gaze of the Kuat sun with icy indifference. Viewed on some primitive planet in the far reaches of space, the towering figure in polished black armor might have appeared to be the carved likeness of an evil deity. Aboard the Imperial Transfer

Station, however, the Dark Lord of the Sith was seldom mistaken for statuary.

Darth Vader watched the might of the Empire converge around him. The gathered fleet was immense. Ships numbered in the thousands. But the Dark Lord ignored the multitude of combat and support craft that darted into position like an insect swarm. To the hundreds of cruisers, Dreadnaughts, and frigates, he gave nothing more than a cursory glance. Even the assembled Star Destroyers, three dozen strong, received minimal attention.

The observation platform was absolutely silent as the focus of Vader's concentration slowly drifted into view. And its arrival sent every other ship scurrying out of the way...

At 8, 000 meters, or five Star Destroyers, in length, the warship dwarfed everything except for the space station itself. The first Super-class Star Destroyer was a gift from the Emperor, and like all of Palpatine's favors, it came with a price. The Executor was to serve as Lord Vader's personal flagship, from which he would carry out the order to engineer the final destruction of the Rebel Alliance.

The Dark Lord finally moved, slightly inclining his masked head "Your presence was requested over an hour ago. " There was a pause punctuated by a hollow, filtered breath. "You are late. Sollaine. "

"My apologies. Lord Vader. " responded a figure from the shadows of the entrance way. "I was attending to more important matters. "

"Indeed?"

"The Emperor has charged me with ferreting out Rebel spies. " Sollaine stepped into the room, boots cracking with sharp reports against the polished floor. He was dressed in a customized version standard Imperial ISB uniform: black, without rank insignia, and creased as if by razor's edge. What caught one's attention immediately, though, was not the man's fashion sense: both of Sollaine's hands were prosthetic replacements. Not unusual in and of themselves, except for the fact that they were not covered by synthflesh. His hands entertained no pretense of being real, their silver-blue metal frighteningly skeletal, each finger adorned with a long, serrated claw.

Sollaine calmly approached Vader, seemingly unruffled by the fear that affected most everyone in the Dark Lord's presence. To that end, the ISB had come under his control.

Without turning, Vader extended a hand toward Sollaine. A small datapad rested between the gloved fingers. "How fortunate then that I selected you for this assignment, the first you will assume in your new capacity. "

Sollaine accepted the pad and quickly perused the information it held. He betrayed no outward emotion, save for a nearly imperceptible facial twitch. "These files are heavily encoded. It would take at least five standard days for Cryptanalysis to decipher them. And we know full well the Rebel scum will have all their agents out in half that time. "

"Then for your sake, I suggest you work with double the efficiency. The Emperor considers this a mission of the most vital nature.

"What do you mean?"

Vader slowly turned his head to face the ISB officer. "You are charged with identifying an Alliance deep-cover agent and delivering this thorn in the Emperor's side to me. " A long echoing breath interrupted the Dark Lord. "Alive. "

Sollaine eyed the gloved finger that could direct the dark side of the Force to squeeze the life from a man. "As you wish, " he answered, voice dripping with venom. "It shall be done. "

Vader returned his gaze to the far reaches of space. "I would have performed this task myself, but the Emperor has other work for me. " he said nodding in the direction of the Executor.

Sollaine stared at the remarkable spaceship without bothering to hide his envy.

Vader continued, "So I recommended you... "

Sollaine's eyes widened with sudden realization.

"I am pleased that we understand each other, " the Dark Lord said.

After a short pause, Sollaine found his voice. "As am I. "

"Excellent. " Vader crossed the room in three graceful strides.

Sollaine stood silently for a few moments, too stunned to do anything except stare at the datapad in his hands. The machine merely stared back, offering either triumph or damnation within its electronic memory.

"And, Sollaine?" The booming voice demanded the ISB officer's attention.

The Dark Lord of the Sith had paused in the entranceway. "Congratulations, " Vader said, and in a swirl of voluminous black cape, he was gone.

* * *

General Airen Cracken stared at the report on his datapad in disbelief. How could this happen? he asked whatever gods of fortune ruled the galaxy. If they heard, they gave no response. "You wanted to see me?"

Surprised, Cracken glanced at the man who stood inside his door. The General tried to suppress a grin, but was only partially successful. "Don't you ever knock?"

"Only when I have to, " Cryle Cavv said with a wink. He was In his late forties, but his bright azure eyes gleamed with the mischief of a much younger man.

Cracken stood up to embrace his friend. "It's been too long, you old thief. "

"Well, the renowned Alliance General is always busy. And who are you calling old?" Cavv folded his arms across his chest. "I'm insulted. "

"So am I. " Cracken said, holding out his hand.

Sheepishly. Cavv returned the General's chronometer. "As I always say, you may be able to spot a thief in a second.. .

"... but by that time your chronometer's already in his pocket. " Cracken shook his head. "Same old Cavv. "

Cavv surveyed the small office, sparse by any account. "Same old Cracken. Just enough to get by. " His eyes locked onto the only item that seemed out of place, a small glass display case containing a gold hydrosponder carved with the inscription: 'Cracken's Crew Says Hello. ' Cavv smiled, tracing a hand respectfully over the case. "The good old days on Contruum. "

Cracken nodded. "Don't even think about it. "

The thief grinned, then removed his hand from the case and took a seat. "So, how are Josta and the kids?"

"Great. Dena just started school and Pash... Well. I may just make a starfighter pilot out of him, yet. " Cracken grew serious. "I'm sorry to hear about Tascin and Rannah. The attack on Ryvellia came as a shock to everyone here. "

Cavv nodded. "When I arrived in V'eldalv, there was nothing left except smoking ruins. I was lucky to find my nephew at all, let alone alive. "

"How is he holding up?"

"Well, it hasn't been easy, but he's still young. Children are tough, and Sienn's no exception. The boy's got Cavvian blood in his veins, after all. "

"Yeah... poor kid. "

Cavv grinned impishly. "Well, as much as I enjoy trading insults with my favorite ex-Commander, I assume that's not the sole reason for this auspicious invitation. "

"If only the galaxy was that accommodating... " The General gave a long sigh. "And as you well know, lately it has become an even more dangerous place. "

"You mean merely because we have a power-crazed Emperor freely wielding planet-destroying technology like the Death Star? surely you jest... "

Cracken rolled his eyes and continued. "Well, it's even more dangerous if you happen to be an Alliance spy... "

"I know the feeling, " Cavv said with an arched eyebrow. "An Imperial infiltrator recently secured a coded Alliance file containing top secret information, including the identities of

some of our agents. He was caught, but not before transmitting the data to the Empire... Luckily, most of our operatives can easily disappear before the files are decrypted. "

Cavv paled slightly. "My name was in those files?"

"No. And though I'm sure the Empire would be happy to pick up everyone's favorite ex-Special Ops Agent, they may get something just as valuable: an extremely useful deep-cover operative whose cover is actually quite authentic. "

"An well-placed Imperial turncoat? Very intriguing, General, " the thief said with a smile. "You have my undivided attention. "

"The operative in question is Rivoche Tarkin, niece of the late Grand Moff. "

For the first time. Cavv was silent. "You must be joking. "

"I wish I were. " Cracken paused, his face deadly serious. "Every-thing I'm telling you is heavily classified, of course. Only a few of my top agents even know about her. "

Cavv nodded.

"Rivoche has been an incredible help to us. New Cylimba would never have been evacuated without her information. I want to return the favor. Her heritage isn't going to save her from a very public and painful execution when the Empire discovers t he truth. "

A look of understanding dawned on the thief's face. "You want me to get her out... "

"You're the only one I can count on for this. Cavv. I'll be honest with you, I almost didn't ask for your help, but I had no other choice. Intelligence resources are already spread thin as it is, and Mon Mothma can't authorize a full-scale rescue attempt. " The General lowered his voice. "Unfortunately, there are also political considerations we must consider. There will be repercussions within the Alliance if Rivoche's name became public. A lot of people just aren't going to believe her because of her lineage. Tarkin and his Doctrine spread terror, hatred, and death throughout the galaxy. The blood of millions was on his hands. "

Drawing in a deep breath. Cavv leaned back in his chair. "Okay, I'll go get her. "

General Cracken smiled in relief, clapping his friend on the arm.

Cavv held up a warning finger. "I'm not sure I can pull this off alone, though. Can I borrow somebody?"

"Already taken care of, " Cracken said, tapping the comlink on his desk.

The thief shook his head, chuckling softly. "You think you know me that well, huh?"

"That's why I've got the rank insignia... "

The door opened, and a small man stumbled into the room. His face was barely visible above the stack of datapads in his arms. The mousy assistant finally managed to place his burden on the desk. He straightened up and cleared his throat. "You rang, General?"

Cavv shot Cracken a look. "Please tell me this isn't him. "

The General laughed out loud. "No. This is Gerind, my assistant.

Those datapads contain everything you need to know for the mission. " Cracken gestured behind Cavv. "That's your partner. "

The thief turned around, but all he saw was an armored chestpiece. Cavv slowly angled his head until he was staring at a face. The big stranger snarled, baring sharpened teeth.

Cavv promptly took one step back.

Amused, Cracken stepped around the desk to make the introductions. "Cavv, I'd like you to meet Quillin Arkell. "

Arkell grunted an acknowledgment.

"Pleasure. I'm sure, " Cavv said, extending a hand.

The big man stared at it, but made no move to accept the greeting.

Cavv shrugged, studying his partner. Arkell stood over two meters tall, with a shock of silver hair shaved military-style in the back and on the sides. His eyes were solid blue and contained no pupils. Armor plating the color of ash covered Arkell's torso, and the dark bodysuit underneath was strained by solid muscle.

"I'm glad he's on our side, " the thief noted.

Cracken checked his chronometer. "I hate to interrupt this touching introduction, but you can get to know each other on the way. With this mission, time might be the most dangerous enemy you'll have worry about. "

Cavv gave a rueful smile. "Somehow. I get the feeling that won't be the case. "

The General shook each man's hand. "Good luck, and may the Force be with you both. "

The thief paused at the door, cocking one eyebrow. "Assuming I survive this little endeavor. I'm probably going to require a small favor in return... "

"You pull this off, Cavv, and you can have anything you want... "

"Good, " Cavv said with an unmistakable twinkle in his eye, and disappeared out of the room.

* * *

The G Cat entered hyperspace, the sleek craft cutting an easy path through the starlines.

"We've got about nineteen hours until we reach Corulag, " Cavv announced from the pilot's chair. He glanced back at the passenger seats for a response, but Arkell was staring straight ahead as if he hadn't heard.

"Refreshments are currently being served on the lido deck" Cavv continued, "and our shockball tournament begins at 1200 standard time. "

Still no reply from the big man...

"Oookay, " Cavv said, turning back around, "I can see this is going to be a long trip. "

Uncomfortable silence filled the cockpit for what seemed like an eternity. It was broken only by the periodic beeping of the only other occupant: a weathered gold and green R2 unit. The astromech droid rested snugly in a jury-rigged compartment that would have served as the usual seat for a co-pilot.

"It is dishonorable among my people to associate with thieves. "

Cavv was so shocked by the sound of a voice other than his own, he nearly jumped out of his chair. "I'm sorry?"

"It is not befitting for a noble warrior to ally himself with cowardly scum, " Arkell said with bared teeth.

"Don't get your shiny hair in knots about it, pal. " Cavv gave a reassuring wink. "I'll just make an exception in your case. "

"You dare mock me?" Arkell suddenly rose to his full height, an act that would surely have been impressive had it not been performed in the relatively tight confines of a spaceship.

* * *

Arkell slowly opened his eyes, and moaned as a dull pain seemed to sharpen itself in his skull. As groggy as he was, it took him a moment to get oriented. The big man was stretched out on a bunk bed, staring up at Cavv's grinning face.

Shaking his head ruefully, the thief slipped a small medpac back into its container. "Seems I was wrong. " he said, checking his chronometer. "This was a pretty fast trip. "

Arkell growled something unintelligible and started to rise. Waves of nausea and a sudden throbbing in his head sent him back to his horizontal orientation.

Cavv took a seat on the bed across the way. "The painkiller should take effect any moment. We have an hour left, and I suggest you use it to relax and regain your strength. "

"Wise words... From whom did you steal them?"

"Though you may find this hard to believe. I don't just grab whatever's not protected by a force held. " Cavv narrowed his eyes, appraising the big man. "I've met one like you before. A Velabri. I mean. I meet plenty of thick skulls. "

Arkell looked about ready to suffer the pain and get up to throttle Cavv. "If you claim to know my species, then you should also know we take offense to foolishness. "

"You mean, no sense of humor. "

"There is nothing funny about war. And war is life to a Velabri Lancer. We are the sovereign protectors of our people. The elite of the elite chosen to fight for the Velabri species. "

"So where does the famed Velabri Bloodvow fit into the puzzle?"

It was Arkell's turn to be shocked, though he quickly recovered his composure. "What would you know of a pledge of honor?"

Cavv's eyes seemed to look past Arkell. "Only what I learned when I promised my dying sister that I'd raise her son as if he were my own. "

Arkell turned away, gazing at the underside of the bunk above him with unusual interest. There was uncomfortable silence, and then the big man spoke softly. "A long time ago, in the earliest days of the Alliance, the Rebels aided in the evacuation of the rightful government of Velabri, the homeworld of my people. The officials and their families were smuggled out of the system just before the Imperial invasion fleet arrived. One of the

transports came under fire and was about to be captured. If it were not for the quick action of a young fighter pilot, the transport would have been lost. The transport was carrying the family of Quillin Durand, my father, and he swore a Bloodvow that the debt would be repaid one day. " His voice faltered only slightly. "He was killed soon after, but the Bloodvow passed from father to eldest son... to me. You see, that young pilot was Airen Cracken. " Arkell's eyes flashed. "And I am here to discharge the debt my family owes him. "

Cavv nodded in appreciation. "Let's hope it gets repaid in full. "

"I assume you have some semblance of a strategy for this mission. "

"Sure. " the thief said, getting to his feet. "When you're feeling better, come back up to the cockpit and I'll tell you about it. "

"In other words, there's no plan, " Arkell said flatly. Cavv flashed a wide grin, and then disappeared down the corridor.

* * *

Captain Nevik quickly crossed the command deck of the Imperial Star Destroyer Devastator, quite a feat considering the man's apparent lack of regular exercise. "The techs have just finished decoding-"

Sollaine snatched the datapad out of the captain's hands and quickly began cycling through the data.

Unperturbed. Nevik proudly puffed out his substantial chest and continued. "We can begin rounding up the Rebel scum immediately. I believe one of them is in the Alfestril System, which of course is less than an hour away from our current position-"

Sollaine's eyes flew open as he read the last name on the list. "It can't be... "

"I assure you, sir. This ship can be there in forty standard minutes. "

"Idiot!" Sollaine shoved the datapad into the captain's gut, the sheer strength of the prosthetic hand driving the large man to the deck. "Set a new course: maximum speed to Corulag. " His lips twisted slightly as an idea came to him. "Terminate our transponder signal and maintain wideband communications silence. "

In near unison, the Devastator's bridge crew stared up from the electronic pits to either side of the elevated walkway that Sollaine was currently pacing. They seemed unsure of

whether to follow his orders without the approval of their captain, who was just getting to his feet.

"Are you idiots deaf as well as dumb? I said, best speed to Corulag!"

"Belay that order!" Nevik said, his face flushing in anger. "This is utterly unacceptable. "

Sollaine swiveled his head around, cold eyes locking onto the captain from under narrowed lids.

The captain continued undaunted. "We are not some smuggler ship sneaking around the galaxy. This is an Imperial Star Destroyer. And I will not be party to your dubious scheme... "

Sollaine walked over to Captain Nevik, patting the man shoulder. "You're right, of course. This is quite unacceptable... "

"I'm glad that you understa-" Nevik was abruptly silenced as Sollaine's prosthetic hand closed around his throat. The silver-blue claws dug into the thick folds of flesh, drawing blood. Gurgling for breath, Nevik frantically tried to pry himself free, but the artificial hand proved too strong.

Suddenly, a loud pulse of energy formed around Sollaine's hand. Shimmering lances of bluish electricity danced across the metallic surface, traveling down the hand and arcing through the fingers. The shimmering serpents quickly reached their prey. The captain's eyes flew open, and the last thing he saw before the massive shock short-circuited his life was Sollaine's maniacal grin...

The younger officers looked away almost immediately, and even the hardened veterans didn't last long. Only Sollaine was left to witness the horrid spectacle in its entirety. After seemingly endless moments. Nevik's body ceased its shaking. The captain's uniform was blackened, and smoke trailed into the air in thin wisps.

Still retaining his grip on the corpse, Sollaine let his icy gaze sweep the room, falling on each officer in turn.

The crew's doubts seemed to instantly evaporate as they rushed to obey his commands.

Sollaine loosened his grip and what was left of Nevik hit the floor hard, causing many among the crew to wince. He gestured at two junior techs. "Remove this mess. " The men paled at their assigned task, but quickly complied. Without another word, Sollaine walked over to the viewport and stared out at the expanse of space that lay ahead of him. A smile began to curl one side of his lip. "You will not take the credit for this one, Vader, " Sollaine whispered to the stars. "I will bring the traitor to the Emperor, himself. And when I do, the Executor will have a new master. "

* * *

Arkell studied the cockpit displays, taking careful stock of the G Cat's equipment. When he got too close to one of the consoles, the unit swiveled its head around and emitted two scolding beeps. "What's going on?" Cavv asked from around the corner.

"Nothing. This hunk of junk seems to be touchy, " Arkell said with a snarl.

"Fweeep beep thwaap boo-beep, " was the droid's indignant reply. "Artoo-Arcee may be touchy, but he's also right. Don't touch anything, Velabri. My ship is a delicate work of art. "

"Black market art is more like it. If I'm not mistaken, this is an Arakyd Helix-an extremely rare, outrageously expensive, Light Interceptor. "

"Light freighter, " the thief's voice corrected.

Arkell snorted. "If this is a pure transport vessel, then I'm a Jawa. " He shook his head in amazement. "I've seen less of a weapons load-out on military starfighters. If you expect to sneak into Corulag with this ship, you're in for a rude awakening. From what I've heard, most Imperial agents are suspicious as soon as they hear the word 'Helix. ' We'll be searched for sure... "

"All the better to hide in plain sight, then. " Cavv stepped into the cockpit and executed an elegant twirl, proudly displaying the finely tailored jumpsuit and embroidered half-cloak he wore. The brilliant coloration of the clothing turned the movement into a prismatic blur. "What do you think? Does it say 'Imperial Noble'?"

"If so, thief, it's talking very loudly. "

"Wonderful, " the thief said. "There's no such thing as a restrained nobleman. Which explains not only the clothing, but the exotic taste in ships as well. "

"I assume, then, that all of this craft's datawork has been extensively falsified. "

"My version makes the real thing look like a forgery. " Cavv said with a wink.

"I'm still not convinced this is going to work, thief. If there's-"

Cavv interrupted him, raising a finger into the air. "Oh, by the way. From now on, you shall address me as Lord Velastor T'nnac. M'lord will be fine, though. "

Arkell smiled, but the gesture was anything but friendly. His sharp incisors were clearly visible. "And why would I want to do that?"

"How else should an alien slave address his master?" Noting the expression on Arkell's face, Cavv quickly continued. "Well, actually you'll be serving as my bodyguard. Come on, Velabri... With those eyes and teeth, you can't expect to pass for human. And we all know how xenophobic the residents of the Core Worlds are..."

The argument seemed to work, at least for the moment. Arkell obviously wasn't happy about the situation, but he reluctantly nodded in agreement.

"See? I told you everything was going to work out. Easy credits, Velabri. All you need is a good plan. It's like the Jawas always say,

'Chikkel atik binmett nikk jchimmen kha. '"

"Meaning?"

"Follow the Bantha to water, but watch where you step. "

Arkell frowned. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Well, nothing really, " Cavv said, "but I really like that one. "

"Boooo-weeep woop. "

"I see it, Arcee. " Cavv blinked twice, stunned. Then he added in a soft voice, "How could you miss it?"

"I thought you said everything was going to work out... easy credits, " Arkell said mockingly as he leaned over the thief's shoulder.

The space lanes were overflowing with ships of all shapes and sizes. Cavv had never seen so many vessels gather where there wasn't a war taking place. They numbered well into the hundred thousands and moved like a giant herd of Bantha. Only instead of Sand People doing the shepherding, it was a fleet of Star Destroyers and countless Imperial picket ships. The large blue-green sphere of Corulag could barely be seen for all the congestion. Arkell was stunned. "Such a gathering of ships. What does it mean?"

"Well, either the Corulag Bureau of Tourism is giving away free Death Stars to the first million visitors, " Cavv said dryly, "or else the Empire knew we were coming and grossly overestimated our capabilities. "

"Fweeeep weee-beep. "

"Time to put our little masquerade to the test. " Cavv calmly answered, reaching for the comlink. "We're being hailed... "

The thief stared at the screen for a moment, reading the incoming message with a look of utter shock.

"What is it?" Arkell asked impatiently.

"Hold on a second. This can't be right.. Arcee, run a slice and see if you can dig up some more information. "

"Bo-beep. "

"Well?"

The thief looked up, a strange expression on his face. "It was an automatic message welcoming us to an engagement party. "

"That's some party... "

Arcee let out another series of beeps, drawing the thief's attention back to the screen.

"You can say that again, " Cavv said, growing very pale. "The guest list includes the local governors. Moff Jamson Caglio, and... " His voice raised an entire octave. "Darth Vader. "

Arkell's eyes began to scour the ships. "Vader's here?"

"Not for another nine hours or so... just before the ceremony starts. "

"Tarrek's eyes!" Arkell exclaimed. "Who in the galaxy is getting engaged here?"

"Vastin Caglio, eldest son of the Moff. And his bride-to-be is... Rivoche Tarkin. "

The Velabri warrior shook his head. "We'll never make it past security now. "

"I was once told that 'never is merely a state of mind. If you are so sure it cannot be done, then it will not be done. '"

Arkell solemnly nodded in agreement. "For once, you make sense. Where did you learn such wise advice?"

"You'd be surprised what you can learn after crash landing on an uninhabited swamp planet in the middle of nowhere. " Cavv ignored Arkell's confused expression and turned back to the controls. "Arcee, think you can get us added to the guest list?"

"Fweep beep. "

Cavv patted the droid and grinned. "Looks like we'll be attending our first Imperial soiree." The thief unbuckled himself from the pilot's seat and disappeared down the corridor. "I hope they're serving those tiny multi-meat cylinders in the baked bread pockets"

Arkell stared after him. "Now what are you doing?"

"Why, looking for a gift of course. " Cavv said with a wink. "We wouldn't want to drop in empty-handed, would we?"

* * *

The Devastator dropped out of hyperspace, nearly running into a large cargo frigate.

Sollaine stared out the viewport, gaping at the massive gathering of vessels. "What in the Empire is going on here?"

Major Gistol, Sollaine's ISB adjutant, quickly answered. "We've just been contacted by the Star Destroyer Nullifier. It seems there's some sort of engagement party taking place on Corulag. "

"I don't care if a Moff is marrying a wampa. Just navigate through this mess and order a path cleared for our landing force. "

"Well, sir, there's a problem... " The Major shifted uncomfortably under Sollaine's harsh glare and quickly continued. "For security reasons, no vessel is permitted to land on the planet without proper clearance. I suppose that's why the space lanes are so congested. "

Sollaine strode over to the communications console and jabbed a metal finger into the comlink switch. "Get me the officer in command. "

After a moment, a gravelly voice responded. "Admiral Nyran here. To whom am I speaking?"

"This is Sollaine, ISB Central Commander. I demand that you grant me immediate clearance. "

"That will be impossible, sir. " Nyran said. "I am under very strict orders. "

"I am countermanding those orders, " Sollaine said through clenched teeth.

"I regret to inform you, sir, that you don't have the authority to do so. My actions have been directed by Lord Vader, himself. " There was absolute silence on the Devastator's bridge. The crew closest to the comm station backed away as far as decorum allowed for Sollaine seemed ready to explode. Instead, he lowered his voice to a dangerous whisper and spoke into the comlink. "Let me clarify the situation, Admiral. What if dispatch my ground force to Corulag regardless of orders?"

"Then a most unfortunate situation will arise. Though considering the strength of my battle fleet, it will be mercifully brief. Is that clear enough for you? Sir?"

One side of Sollaine's face twisted into a mockery of a smile "Crystal clear. Thank you, Admiral. We'll be taking our leave, now. Enjoy the celebration. " He slammed his fist onto the console abruptly ending communication.

Much to the comm crew's relief, Sollaine stalked away. Gistol hurried after him, datapad in hand.

"Ready a Beta-class shuttle, " Sollaine said in a tone that made it clear he was in no mood to be further argued with. "I want a squad of Storm Commandos prepped and ready for departure in three minutes. At which point, the Devastator will take a moment to open fire on any independent ship in sight, then escape to hyperspace. In the confusion, the shuttle will make its way to the planet below where I will personally deal with this entire matter. " He paused, allowing his stony gaze to over sweep the bridge. "Does anyone have a problem with that?"

No one did.

Sollaine nodded, then took Gistol by the shoulder. "We have work to do... "

* * *

Rivoche Tarkin was surprised to hear her door chime. She wasn't expecting anyone. In fact, she had given the guards orders not to disturb her. It was bad enough that in a few hours she'd be stuck playing gracious hostess to half the sector. All she wanted in the meantime was a little peace and quiet. Was that so much to ask?

With a long-suffering sigh. Rivoche left the comfortable chair out on the balcony of her penthouse suite. She walked over to the door, growing more annoyed with each step. Tucking an errant strand of hair back over her ear, she asked curtly. "Who is it?"

There was a slight pause. "Flower delivery, ma'am. "

"Just leave it by the door, then. "

"Uhhh... you need to sign for it. "

"Someone downstairs can do that, " she said, growing even more irritated, "I'm busy. "

"They're, uh, delicate flowers. They could possibly, uh, wilt if you don't get them in water immediately. " Having reached her limit. Rivoche keyed the panel, and the door slid open, revealing Cavv and Arkell. The thief held an elegantly wrapped package, tied with a bow, under his arm. "What is going on here?" she asked.

Cavv was too busy glaring at his partner to answer her. "That's the last time I let you try your hand at subtlety. Retter stick to bashing skulls. " The thief shook his head in disgust. "Flower delivery, indeed. "

"Is this some sort of joke?" She narrowed her eyes, studying the duo.

Cavv put on his best grin. "I'm sure I can explain everything. "

"Somehow. I doubt that. But feel free to go ahead and begin while I call for my guards. "

"Not a good idea, " Cavv cautioned. "They're taking a prolonged nap... "

Rivoche suddenly jammed her hand on the control panel. Before the door could slide closed, though. Arkell stepped forward and extended a muscular arm. The door remained open. Rivoche stumbled backwards, unsure of what to do.

Cavv moved around the Velabri and entered the room. "It's okay. We're here to help you. " Noting the look on her face, he quickly added. "The Jawa rides at midnight. "

Rivoche paused, tilting her head. After a moment's confusion, she responded. "The Jawa rides alone. "

The thief nodded in approval and held out a hand. "We're here to get you out. You're in grave danger. Rivoche. "

Arkell entered, letting the door close behind him. "Time is short. We must hurry... "

She seemed slightly disoriented. "I never thought this day would come... "

Noting her unsteadiness. Cavv slipped an arm around Rivoche's waist. "As much as it pains me to say, my partner is correct. Our best chance of escape lies in celerity. We can sort things out when we're safely out of the system. "

Rivoche nodded in agreement.

"Is there anything you need to take with you?" Cavv asked. "All my important personal possessions are at the family estate on Eriadu. There's nothing here that I'll particularly miss. "

"Good, then let's go. "

She paused, glancing at the present that Arkell carried. "Is that for me?"

Arkell snorted derisively. "Just like a female... "

Rivoche put her hands on her hips and glared. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Can we please continue this conversation later?" Cavv asked keying the control panel.

Sollaine was waiting outside the door, arms folded and a grin of triumph on his face. A handful of black-armored Imperial Storm Commandos stood behind him, weapons held at the ready.

"Excuse me... I have reason to believe there is a traitor in your midst. " Sollaine said, staring directly at Rivoche with a predatory smile. Then he noticed Arkell and Cavv, and narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "May I see your invitations, gentlemen?"

"Of course. " Cavv said quickly. "I have them right here. " He flashed an embarrassed grin as he realized his hands were full with the package. "Could you hold this a moment?"

Without waiting for an answer. Cavv shoved the package into Sollaine's arms, knocking the ISB Commander back into the hall. The thief quickly shut the door just as blaster fire erupted from the hall.

As the door began to strain under the barrage, Cavv reached for a control device wrapped around his wrist. Tapping it once, he dove to the floor and screamed, "Down!"

Arkell's reflexes took over and the warrior wordlessly obeyed, dragging a confused Rivoche down with him.

The thunderous explosion that followed seemed to shake the entire building. What was left of the door was blown off its hinges and sailed through the apartment, crashing into the far wall. Smoke and ash showered the room, and everything was dark for a few moments.

Arkell rose, helping Rivoche to her feet. Cavv let out a small cough and wiped his face. All three of them were covered with dark soot, but were otherwise unharmed.

There was no sign of Sollaine or his Storm Commandos, but the hall was now marred by a gaping hole that displayed the floor beneath them. A few surprised bystanders stared up through the opening in confusion.

The roof had suffered a similar fate as a result of the blast, offering a splendid view of Corulag's blue sky.

"What was in that gift?" Rivoche asked.

"Thermite. " Cavv answered.

"I'm truly touched. " she said.

"It never fails, " the thief said with a dramatic shake of his head. "You try to do something nice for someone and it blows up in your face. "

Arkell rolled his eyes. "If you two are clone trading witticisms. I'd like to leave. Preferably before someone tips off the authorities to our impromptu adjustment of the building's decor. "

"I wouldn't call it much of an improvement. " Rivoche said, wrinkling her nose.

Cavv pouted dramatically. "Everybody's a critic... "

* * *

Pain.

It was all his consciousness could embrace for the moment. The agony was so overwhelming, there wasn't room for anything else.

The searing white light didn't fade, but other functions began to slowly return.

Memory.

With his vision blurred, the recalled images were all he had to behold. The last thing he remembered was tossing the package away from him. The command for the squad to open fire...

And then his world exploded into force and fury.

He assumed the armored bodies of the Storm Commandos that surrounded him had provided adequate shielding. Or he would have shared their fate...

His eyes began to focus and he realized the large azure blur was really the sky. At that moment, he knew he must be on the roof.

In great pain, he took stock of his injuries. Something was wrong internally; he could feel unusual movement in his ribcage. His breath was labored, but respiration was otherwise unaffected. Countless bruises and cuts had found a home under the tattered remains of his uniform.

He flexed his hands, reassured by the click-clack of his claws. His legs were similarly unaffected, and after a minor struggle, he managed to stand.

Sollaine took a cautious first step, and then another. And an-other. It quickly became easier to ignore the pain. He smiled as best he could, despite the bright red gash that bisected his face.

As long as he lived, the outcome was not in question, Vader had laid down a challenge of ascendancy, but Sollaine would win the game.

It was only a matter of time.

* * *

"This is not good. "

Cavv ducked back into the alleyway and leaned heavily against the wall. "In fact, as these things go, it's really, really bad. "

"The patrols have increased?" Arkell asked solemnly. Cavv nodded. "You'd think Curamelle was under martial law. Moff Caglio must have mobilized all of the city's defense forces to search for you... " He nibbled on the tip of his thumb, and said softly. "Something just doesn't fit here, though. "

"Vastin is very protective. " Rivoche said. "And whatever the spoiled brat wants, his daddy gets for him. "

"Not exactly the gushing adoration of a typical fiancée-to-be... " Cavv commented.

She snorted derisively. "That's because this entire relationship is nothing but a fraud. Vastin sees me as the perfect token wife-yet another stepping stone on the road to political power. As far as I'm concerned, all he's good for is providing cover. You see, as of late, certain high-ranking Imperials have voiced their belief that it's time I was married and raised a generation of cannon fodder for the Emperor's army. "

Arkell glanced at the Imperial military speeders streaking past their hiding place. "As much as I dislike agreeing with the thief, his assessment of the situation is quite accurate. And the longer we remain, the worse it will become. "

"They sent a thief to rescue me?" Rivoche asked. "Watch your tone, young lady. You don't know a thing about me. " Rivoche crossed her arms and smirked. "I do know that so far, this hasn't exactly been a flawless rescue... "

The thief sighed and looked to Arkell for support, but the big men shook his head and said, "We forbid our unmarried females to leave the family habitat without permission of their master. "

Rivoche spun around, staring lasers at Arkell. "You belligerent, chauvinistic warmonger! I have a-"

"I've got it!" Cavv said suddenly.

"What?" asked Rivoche and Arkell in unison. "I think we have two distinct groups of Imperials here. And they're not working together. "

"That'll be the day, " Rivoche laughed. "The Empire isn't about to be torn apart by factions. "

"Think about it, though. The man who showed up at the penthouse was definitely ISB. He knew you were a spy, and he only brought a single squad with him. And when was the last time you saw Storm Commandos around here?" Before anyone could argue, he continued. "Besides, from what we've seen of Caglio's forces, they aren't hunting you as much as looking for you. I bet the Moff thinks you were attacked at the penthouse and have been kidnapped-probably by Rebels. "

"What you're saying makes sense, thief, " Arkell said, "but why wouldn't the ISB agent have shared his information?"

Cavv shrugged. "Maybe he wants the credit all to himself. We know the Imps aren't above petty political maneuvering as long as they don't think they'll be caught. "

"Well, if he and his squad are all dead, then maybe no one else knows about me. " Rivoche turned to Cavv. "We could use that to our advantage, right?"

"Possibly, but I'm not sure how yet. Our situation doesn't improve much, though. " Cavv gently pulled her hood back up over her face. "Either way, we still have to keep your identity hidden or else... " The whine of repulsorlift vehicles made him flinch. "We can't stay here much longer. "

Arkell glowered, holding up his blaster pistol. "We're not going to be able to make it back to the ship, either. I can imagine the security measures at the starport... "

If we can't get to the ship, " Cavv said, pulling out a small comlink, "Then we'll have the ship come to us. "

Rivoche turned to Arkell with a raised eyebrow. "Is he firing on all thrusters?"

The Velabri warrior shrugged.

She turned her attention back to Cavv. "The last I checked, this bustling metropolis wasn't exactly filled with landing sites. "

"Improvisation is the child of desperation, " Cavv said with a self-satisfied grin. "What's the tallest building in the city?" After a moment's thought, Rivoche answered. "The Royal Galaxy Hotel. " She unsuccessfully tried to fight off a smile as she glanced at the Velabri. "Is it always this annoying when he's right?"

"No, " Arkell answered with a straight face. "It's usually worse... "

* * *

Sollaine stumbled into the building, bleeding on the plush white carpet. When the secretary tried to stop him, he shoved her to the floor, and didn't stop until he threw open the office door. He was unfazed by the large blaster rifle pointed at his head.

"What is the meaning of this?" the man with the gun asked from behind the cover of his desk.

Sollaine threw his rank cylinders onto the table and sneered "The Empire is officially requesting your bounty hunting services... "

"There must be some mistake, sir. Coreguard Security does not employ bounty-"

"A flat fee of 100. 000 credits now, that amount to be matched upon delivery. Do we have a deal?"

The proprietor of Coreguard Security Services smiled. "How many of our employees would you like to activate for this job, sir?"

"All of them. "

Sollaine stared at the motley group of bounty hunters assembled before him. Just over fifty strong, they were mean, ugly, and produced a unique combined aroma.

The ISB Commander didn't notice; his sense of smell had dulled slightly. Not that it mattered. Only one thing was important.

Capturing Rivoche and returning with her to the Emperor. Watching Vader tossed aside like the fool that he was, then taking his rightful place at the Emperor's side.

Sollaine shook himself from the daydream and returned his attention to the matter at hand. He knew with Moff Caglio's forces guarding all points of egress out of the city, her accomplices would have no chance of getting her out through the starport.

With that in mind, there was only one way to escape. They would have to leave her somewhere and return to get her in a starship. And there very few places in Curamelle to do that without attracting attention.

The answer suddenly came to him.

Sollaine stared down the congested street, and up into Corulag's sky. He let his eyes drift up the gleaming structure until he could no longer make out the rest of the starscraper, which continued up into the atmosphere and beyond...

His eyes then re-focused on the glittering holosign that read, Royal Galaxy Hotel.

* * *

Cavv slipped the door open and replaced the vibropick into his pocket. "You just can't beat the five-fingered discount on a hotel room. "

Rivoche and Arkell quickly entered behind him, and the thief secured the door.

Cavv took stock of the room and grinned. "Hey, this is a pretty nice place. "

"I'm glad it's up to your standards, " Rivoche said.

Ignoring the barb. Cavv continued his exploration of the room.

"I don't know how we're going to get out of this one. " Arkell was pacing like a caged animal in front of the large transparisteel window. He stopped for a moment and glanced out. From his vantage point, the ground was nothing but a distant memory.

Cavv grinned up at Arkell from a relatively comfortable position on one of the beds. "I don't suppose the Velabri can metamorphose into an avian species at will?" He grinned, giving a shrug of theatrical quality. "I guess your race isn't quite as 'perfectly evolved' as you like to think you are. "

Clearly not amused, Arkell stopped his pacing and started toward Cavv. "If I throw you out that window, the only thing you'll evolve into will be a liquid-based lifeform... "

"Enough!" Rivoche had just about reached her limit. She sat down on the other bed, covering her ears. "Don't you two think the little time we have left could be better spent? For instance-oh, I don't know-trying to save our lives?"

The Velabri folded his arms across his massive chest. "We're trapped in a hotel room, with no other way out except the one we can't use, thanks to that mechanized ISB agent and his legion of bounty hunters up on the roof. "

"At least we discovered they were there, " Cavv argued. "If I hadn't told Arcee to tap into the surveillance imagers on the roof, we would've walked into his trap. "

"One of the few intelligent things you've done, " Arkell said.

Rivoche brushed fallen hair from her face. "I wonder how he survived that blast?"

"From the datafile that Arcee called up, this Sollaine fellow seems to be one mean Imperial. Even by ISB standards... "

Arkell's distant gaze returned to the window. "This is impossible. "

Cavv frowned, fluffing his pillow. "You make everything sound so... pessimistic. "

For the first time. Arkell was at a loss for words. He opened his mouth, closed it, then just turned and headed for the door.

Rivoche raised a curious eyebrow. "Where are you going?" Arkell stopped in front of the door, pulling out his heavy blaster pistol. "I'd rather go out there and die like a warrior than remain here to cower like a selliwyrm!"

"Sometimes cowering to escape notice has its advantages, " Cavv argued. "Of course, other times, it's better to hide in plain sight. "

"And I've also had enough of your idiotic platitudes!"

"Relax. Velabri, " Cavv said, finally standing up. "I've got things taken care of. "

"Oh, you do, do you?"

Rivoche turned her curious gaze to Cavv. "How, exactly?"

Cavv checked his chronometer. "My back-up should be arriving very soon, now. "

"The sooner, the better... " Arkell reached for the door control. "Because it's amazing how things continually get worse. "

"Including your attitude. " Rivoche said, drawing a stifled laugh from Cavv.

Arkell shook his head and thumbed the panel, then turned around. "If it weren't for you, we wouldn't be in this situation. Which is exactly why our females are confined to the Velabri Homeworld. "

When he saw the expression on her face, he thought he was in for another round of insults, then he realized she wasn't looking at him so much as looking past him. Confused, he looked to Cavv, who was absolutely expressionless.

Arkell quickly turned around. He immediately wished he hadn't, for now he was staring at the female figure standing at the entrance to their room. A long braid of hair hung down her back, though what hung from her bandoleer was worse: a dozen thermal detonators. She was dressed in a skintight black bodysuit and gray body armor with a dark faceplate that coldly reflected the look of dread on Arkell's face. One word danced through the Velabri's head, over and over.

Beylyssa.

Arkell could feel the blood drain out of his face. He quickly moved his hand up the wall toward the control panel.

The door shut in the figure's face.

Arkell could only muster enough will to sound out a single word, and it was ranged much higher in pitch than his usual voice. "Down!"

Rivoche didn't need to be told twice. She dropped down behind the bed immediately, just as Arkell came flying over the top of it, landing beside her. He quickly lifted from behind the cover, drawing a bead on the door with his blaster.

That's when Arkell noticed that Cavv wasn't taking cover. In fact, the idiotic thief had calmly walked over to the door, and was about to thumb the panel.

Even worse, he was laughing.

Arkell couldn't believe it. "Are you certifiably insane? That's Beylyssa, the bounty hunter that likes to make things go boom!"

"No... and no, " Cavv answered.

Rivoche chanced a look. "What?"

"No, I'm not insane. " Cavv grinned as he opened the door. The armored figure stepped into the room. "And, no, " Cavv continued, "this is not Beylyssa, although that is the impression that I was hoping for... "

The door shut and Cavv put his arm around the figure. "This is Finn Varatha-our back-up. "

Utterly relieved, Arkell stood up, helping Rivoche to her feet. Holstering the blaster, he walked over. He couldn't help but grin as he extended a hand. "I already like her. Even if she is ugly. "

Cavv chuckled. "Wrong again. "

The Velabri was confused. "On my planet it is customary to make homely women conceal themselves. " he explained.

The armored figure removed the helmet. At first no face was visible, thanks to the release of cascading ebony curls as she shook out the braid. The hair was quickly pushed away from a beautiful, young face. Arkell felt a soft hand close around his, but he was too busy staring with disbelief into a pair of bright blue eyes and a salacious grin.

Varatha was simply breathtaking. "Obviously your planet doesn't have a similar custom forbidding its idiots from traveling the galaxy. " she said with a grin.

Arkell took a step back from the armored woman. "Are you trying to make fun of me?"

"Naah, " Cavv said with a smirk, "'Trying' would imply that she hasn't succeeded yet, Velabri. "

"Velabri, huh?" Varatha directed her gaze at Arkell. "He doesn't look so tough to me. "

"Not merely a Velabri, " Arkell said, drawing up to his full height "I am a Lancer. And for your information, I am tougher than any two humans put together. "

Varatha just grinned and moved closer. "Care to try and prove that?"

The thief quickly interposed himself between them. "Well, are we all ready to leave this party?"

Varatha pursed her lips. "But I just got here... "

Cavv winked at her. "I have it on good authority that there's an even better gala about to start on the roof. Do you wish to join us, my dear?"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world. Got our invitations?"

The thief handed her a datapad.

Varatha examined the information and shook her head. "Hate to burst your blaster, old man, but we're about forty-five troops short of a fair fight. "

"About even odds, then, " Cavv said with a shrug.

"Excuse me?" Rivoche was staring at the thief as if he'd just grown another head. "Unless the Alliance has recently adopted a different mathematical system. I'm figuring we're severely outnumbered. "

"Come on, don't you read our own propaganda? 'Any one Rebel can whip any ten Imperials. ' Says so in the manual... and these aren't even Imps. " The thief grinned. "There are four of us, so we can take out forty of them. "

Varatha chimed in. "And what about the other ten?"

"That's where our esteemed Lancer comes in. Tough as two of us, remember? That means he should be able to handle twice our share without breaking a sweat. " Cavv placed a hand onto Arkell's shoulder. "Right?"

The Velabri's cheeks flushed red and for a moment, his fangs were bared and promising something painful for Cavv. With great determination, though, Arkell's snarl slowly twisted into a forced smile. "Of course, " he hissed through clenched teeth.

It was Varatha's turn to quickly position herself between the would-be combatants. She pulled a blaster from her pack and tossed it to Rivoche. "Know how to handle it, honey?"

Rivoche expertly checked the power pack, lined up the sights, and held the weapon in a marksman's ready position.

"I take it that's an affirmative. " Varatha turned to Cavv. "So, what's the plan, old man?"

The thief just smiled.

"Is that the 'I've got it all taken care of, Finn, don't you worry about a thing' smile or the 'I'm gonna make it up as I go along and hope the Force is with me' smile?"

Cavv's mischievous grin widened even further. He took a pair of thermal detonators from Varatha and headed for the door.

Varatha gave a long sigh and reached for her blaster rifle. "Great. "

* * *

"Well, that's about it, " Cavv wheezed, wiping the mixture of perspiration and blood from his forehead as he scanned the rooftop.

"Especially for you!" said a rumbling voice.

Shocked, Cavv slowly turned... and found himself staring clown the business end of a pair of blaster rifles. Two bounty hunters remained.

"Numbers never really were my strong suit, " the thief muttered, raising his hands in surrender.

That's when he noticed Arkell maneuvering up from behind the oblivious hunters. Without warning, the big Velabri slammed their heads together with bone-jarring force.

Until that moment, the thief had never seen battle armor crack like an eggshell. He didn't even want to imagine what happened on the inside...

Arkell stepped forward, pressing a hand against a blaster burn his leg. He sank to the ground between the bodies and glowered at Cavv. "Twice your share. "

The thief shook his head, lightly patting Arkell's shoulder. "Be careful. Velabri. Keep this up and I might start to like you. "

Looking none the worse for wear. Varatha approached them. "Is Rivoche okay?" Cavv asked.

Varatha pulled off her helmet, pushing her sweat-soaked hair out of her eyes. "I'm fine, thanks. " She jerked a thumb over her shoulder "So is she. "

The thief saw Rivoche resting against a transparisteel pylon and nodded. He surveyed the damage. The roof was cluttered with bodies and pock-marked with craters caused by heavy-duty explosions. Smaller holes, the result of blaster fire, were also quite abundant. Alarms were screaming in the background. "Any sign of Sollaine?"

Varatha shook her head. "He disappeared when the detonators started blowing up. "

Rivoche made her way over. "It's a little hard to breathe... "

"If the Royal Galaxy didn't generate atmosphere shielding up here, we wouldn't be able to breathe at all. " Cavv glanced at his chronometer. "I hope Arcee didn't run into any trouble. He s a bit late... "

As if on cue, the inverted triangular nose of the G Cat lifted into view. The light freighter hovered in place as Cavv's comlink sounded

"Bweep-deep tooo-eeep. "

Everyone turned expectantly toward the thief.

Cavv offered a shrug. "Better late than never. "

* * *

The G Cat surged away from the planet, chased by a full squadron of TIE fighters.

Cavv turned to face his passengers. "Everybody strap in! This is going to get ugly. " A burst of blaster fire rocked the ship. "Someone man the plasburst cannons. " He stared at the mass of ships ahead of him. The congestion would provide cover, especially from the Imperials, but it was tantamount to flying through an asteroid field. "Arcee and I are going to have our hands full trying to get us through this maze in one piece. "

Varatha started to unbuckle herself, but Arkell was already on his feet. "He said 'man. '" The Velabri grinned and quickly ascended into the turret before she could respond.

He locked himself into position, and flipped on the targeting systems to track the first TIE. "The battle is joined, thief, " Arkell said and a second later, the plasburst lasers reduced the Imperial fighter to tiny bits.

"You can say that again, " Cavv commented as he saw two Imperial Carrack-class cruisers quickly closing on either side of him.

As the firefight raged across the spacelanes and between the myriad of ships, no one noticed a lone Imperial shuttle slip out of the combat zone into less crowded space. It hung there, motionless, for a few moments; a small, white speck on the dark tapestry surrounding it. Moments later, it was no longer alone.

The familiar triangular shape of the Imperial Star Destroyer Devastator shimmered into existence, its massive docking bay doors open and patiently awaiting the smaller craft.

The G Cat completed a sharp 360-degree roll straight down, and quickly leveled off.

Cavv switched the monitor screen to a rear view and watched as the two Carrack-class cruisers tried to box him in with a unified tractor beam net-but they snared each other instead. The thief imagined the warning klaxons screaming to no avail and found himself wincing as the great spacecraft slammed into each other. "Ouch... now that has got to hurt."

"Thaweeep deep beeeep!"

Cavv turned his attention back to the viewport, and saw an Imperial Star Destroyer closing fast.

"I see it, Arcee. Get our jump calculated as fast as you can. Let me a know the microsecond we're clear!"

Arcee gave an affirmative bleep, leaving Cavv to concentrate on avoiding another group of TIE fighters. He painted one of the Imperial craft with a target lock and fired off a proton torpedo.

"Gotcha!" Cavv gave a whoop of delight as the Cat roared through the TIE's debris.

His excitement was short-lived, though, as the approaching Star Destroyer let loose with a punishing barrage of turbolaser fire.

* * *

"Careful, you idiots!" Sollaine stared out the main viewports on the Devastator's bridge. He hadn't had time to attend to his wounds, but the pain no longer registered. Only one thing mattered... "I want that ship intact!"

Major Gistol nodded crisply. "Ready tractor beams..."

* * *

"I think we're going to make it." Cavv said, almost afraid to believe his own words.

"Think again," Varatha answered flatly, motioning out the viewport.

The gesture wasn't necessary. Cavv already saw the Executor thunder out of hyperspace.

The mammoth Super Star Destroyer materialized directly in the flight path of the G Cat.

"Tarrek's eyes!" Arkell said upon returning to the cockpit, his mouth falling open slightly. "What is that thing?"

Cavv spared the giant ship a quick glance that turned into a double-take. "Trouble." he murmured, pushing forward on the control stick with all his might.

The G Cat seemed to groan in response, but gamely pointed its nose downward.

At that moment, the Devastator's tractor beam emitters reached out with pulsing fingers of energy. Grasping in desperation at the G Cat...

They closed on empty space.

Cavv released a long breath as the Helix's engines propelled it underneath the Imperial flagship and out of harm's way. As they streaked under its superstructure, Arcee let out a shrill beep. "Punch it!" Varatha yelled.

Cavv didn't need much convincing. The stars around them became blurring lines and the G Cat roared into hyperspace. "It's a good thing the Dark Lord is punctual," Rivoche said with a relieved sigh.

Cavv leaned back and let loose a nervous chuckle. "Thank the Force for small favors..."

* * *

Sollaine howled as if he'd been shot. "Damn you. Vader! You'll pay for this, I swear it. " Spittle flew from his mouth. "This is not over!"

Gistol quickly distanced himself from the ISB Commander and a hush fell over the bridge. The Devastator's crew froze as if plunged into carbonite.

"I am afraid it is over... " The voice was unmistakable, as was the echoing rasp of labored breath tinged with a mechanical echo.

Sollaine slowly turned around, and found himself staring at a full size holo-image of Darth Vader.

The glowing image raised a gauntleted fist, with a single finger extended like a lightsaber. "... for you. "

* * *

Cracken couldn't help but smile. "Well, I don't know how you did but you managed to pull it off. Thank you. "

"You're very welcome. " Cavv was grinning from ear-to-ear as he exited the General's office, Arkell was right behind him. "Consider the Bloodvow paid in full. "

"You guys made a great team, " Cracken said, patting Arkell's shoulder.

"A pity we won't be able to continue the relationship... "

"Oh, but you will. "

Arkell's eyes narrowed to slits. "What?"

"I promised Cavv a favor if he succeeded. He asked to have his Special Ops Group reinstated. He requested that you and Finn Varatha be immediately transferred into his tactical unit. "

"What?"

"Cavv wanted it to be a surprise, I guess. "

"Excuse me. General. "

Before Cracken could respond. Arkell was moving quickly down the hall.

The General shrugged and closed the door.

In the Emperor's Service

Moff Jerjerrod knelt before the Emperor in his vast throne room. He bowed his head and hoped he would leave the Imperial Palace alive.

"Rise, my friend. I have a special challenge for you," the Emperor said. "I want you to ease your campaign against the Rebels and leave your work in Logistics and Supply."

Jerjerrod shifted uneasily. He didn't dare voice his concern that he was needed in that ministry to make sure Imperial resources weren't overextended.

"Do not concern yourself with the logistical status of the Empire," Palpatine stated, as if he had read the Moff's mind. "I have a much more important task for you, far better suited to your talents." The Emperor told Jerjerrod what he was to do.

• • •

After Jerjerrod had left the Emperor's throne room, passing through the antechamber with the Royal Guards, he had to get through the Supplicants Waiting Hall. There they were, all lined up — every one of them waiting to see the Emperor. Advisor Golthan stood at the head of the line, with Alec Pradeux and Kren Blista-Vanee behind him. Various Grand Moffs, admirals and other dignitaries waited behind them.

"What did the Emperor want with you?" Pradeux asked.

"Certainly not much," Golthan sneered. "You're just a Moff, Jerjerrod — you couldn't possibly have been given any duty of significance."

Jerjerrod grimaced. "I've been named Director of Imperial Energy Systems, a new subdepartment of the Ministry of Energy. Not terribly exciting, I'll admit, but I'm still proud to be carrying out the Emperor's will."

Pradeux looked nonplused. "Why haven't I been told of this new subdepartment?"

"It looks as if you are about to be briefed," Blista-Vanee said, nodding toward the Royal Guards who were summoning Pradeux into the antechamber. "I'm sure there is a reasonable explanation for this appointment." He looked down on Moff Jerjerrod. "You are a competent overseer, but certainly not the sort to whom the Emperor entrusts vital tasks."

The Moff nodded humbly. "The Emperor has entrusted me with developing a line of large-scale portable power plants for use in disaster relief efforts."

"How quaint," Golthan sneered again. "It almost seems like a demotion for you, Jerjerrod. Were you not formerly an administrator in charge of Logistics and Supply?"

Yes, Jerjerrod thought. *And now I'm in charge of the project which will finally bring about the destruction of the Rebel Alliance.*

Just Another Day's Work

The swoop troopers roared down a Mos Eisley sidestreet, Big Gizz and his armored lieutenant, Spiker, leading the way. The other gang members followed, their modified swoop engines ripping through the air and kicking up the midday dust like a stampeding herd of rabid banthas.

They found Whizzer in a small courtyard where several alleys met. The old Twi'lek was laboriously pushing along a repulsorcart with a medium-sized metal crate on it. Before the oldster could throw up his hands in surprise, the swoopers surrounded him, revving their angry engines and shouting insults at the Twi'lek. Big Gizz raised a hand and the swoopers fell silent.

Gizz's bike roared as it jumped out of the encircled swoop troopers and brought him alongside Whizzer's crate. Gizz stared long and hard into the Twi'lek's quavering eyes, his wild hair rustling in the hot, dusty breeze. "Ey, Whizzah," he shouted into the oldster's face. The Twi'lek seemed to wrinkle under the caustic fumes of Gizz's rancid breath. "We've been lookin' for yah. Jabba tells us you owe him some stuff. He wants dah money ... and he wants his spice."

At this the other swoopers erupted into raucous calls of "Give him the spice, head-tail man," and "Yeah, credits, baby, fork over the credits!"

When they settled down, Gizz moved even closer to Whizzer's face. "What's in dah crate, Whizzah?" The swoop gang's leader leered with pleasure at the Twi'lek's obvious discomfort. "Yah gonna show me, or does Big Gizz have to get one of his swoopahs to break one of those fancy head-tails?"

Whizzer stumbled back, sputtering out excuses. "I was just going to sell this crate off to a smuggler, one shipping out to the Core Worlds ... she could pay me the credits I owe Jabba." Beads of sweat bloomed on his forehead. "Just give me a few days, and I'll have Jabba's money and another load of ryll, and he'll have everything he wants, I swear to you. Just leave me to my business and I'll fix everything."

Gizz snarled, sending another noxious breath into Whizzer's face. His hand shot out, caught the Twi'lek by his vest collar, and drew him close. "Jabba don't take excuses," he growled. "The Bloated One just wants what you owe him." Gizz pushed Whizzer back, and the old Twi'lek almost stumbled over his crate.

Gizz snapped his fingers. "Spiker! Get over here," he barked.

The imposing trooper in the jagged armor swung a leg over his swoop and swaggered over to Gizz's side. Every surface was covered in armor, every piece bristling with metal spikes.

"Rip his head off, Spiker."

Spiker stepped closer to Whizzer and raised a forearm to strike. One swipe and the Twi'lek's face would be torn from his skull. Spiker swung — and

abruptly halted his strike, the jagged spikes only a centimeter from the Whizzer's cringing face. "Just kidding, oldster," Spiker whispered, then broke out in one of those insane, high-pitched giggles. "The ryll, it's in that crate you got there?" he asked, nodding his spiked helmet at the metal crate on the repulsorcart.

Whizzer nodded gingerly.

"Hey, Gizz," Spiker called, turning to his leader. "Whizzer's got the spice right here. Let's not gut his business ... maybe if he gave you a sample, you might give him a few more days on his debt. It gives you two more days to plan every exact and gruesome detail of how you're going to dispose of this Twi'lek trash if he doesn't pay up." The threat was followed by more maniacal laughter.

Big Gizz smiled a crooked-fanged smile. "Yeah, give Big Gizz a sniff and we won't tell Jabba we ran into yah."

Whizzer seemed to agree, although he didn't say anything. He undid the latches on the crate and lifted the lid. The box was filled to the rim with a bluish powder. Big Gizz reached over, thrust his gloved hand into the powder, and stuffed a handful of ryll into his demonic face. He snuffed and licked the blue powder from his hand, spilling much of it on his vest and swoop. When he was done, Big Gizz leaned back in his swoop seat with a contented look on his face.

"Looks like we're done with you, Whizzer," Spiker said, giggling. "Just be sure you have everything you owe Jabba next week, or Gizz here's going to do something to you even I can't imagine." Spiker's thorny head threw back as he let loose another cackle. He hopped on his swoop and followed Gizz out of the alley. The other swoopers zoomed around Whizzer for a moment, shouting "Yeah, next week!" and "Gizz'll get yah!" Once the gang had roared off into the dusty Mos Eisley alleys, Whizzer wiped the sweat from his brow and promptly fainted.

Manaam: Depths Of History

The water world Manaam was, at one time, quite possibly the most important planet in the galaxy outside Coruscant. As the only known source of kolto-a miraculous healing agent that historians believe was several times more effective than modern bacta-Manaam was hotly contested by the Republic and the Sith during Darth Malak's war of conquest four millennia ago. The planet was able to maintain strict neutrality in the conflict for some time, until for mysterious reasons that are still argued in academic circles, kolto production suffered a devastating setback. Without kolto, Manaam rapidly fell into decline. Never a member of the Republic, their petition to join the body was rebuffed, causing the proud native Selkath to swear that their world would never again seek to join with offworlders for any reason.

By the time Emperor Palpatine rose to power, few galactic citizens even remembered that Manaam existed. When the kolto flowed, ships went out of their way to visit the world, but the old hyperspace routes fell out of use long before even Master Yoda began his Jedi studies. Yet the Emperor remembered, and he also knew that Manaam still held many secrets that could be of use to him. The Imperial expeditionary forces found a planet that had fallen into a primitive state populated by natives who barely understood Basic any more, living in undersea caverns far below the surface of the water.

The Imperial troops expected a simple hunting mission, but their superiors had other plans. At the behest of Lord Vader himself, they enslaved the population and built-a resort?

ATTN: Mr. Olodondo Berzix, Manager, Ahto Luxury Resorts

RE: False Advertising

Mr. Berzix,



I have attempted to contact you by HoloNet and comlink, and I've even tried to visit you in person, but whenever I arrived at your offices in East Ahto, you were mysteriously unavailable. I am left with no choice but to send my complaints in this datapad, which I have left with your assistant. I must register my disappointment with Ahto Luxury Resorts, the planet Mana'an in general,

and the description of both in your *Guide to Beautiful Mana'an*. I have four major complaints.

First, your guide describes "an unending planetwide ocean of sparkling blue, unmarred by dry land, as far as the eye can see." Maybe that was the case a hundred years ago, but have you looked outside your window at that ocean lately? It's got a sickly cast and reeks of industrial pollution. Furthermore, your "unending ocean" that's "unmarred by dry land" is full of filthy tribes of aliens living on rafts *and* ugly, muddy islands. These muddy islands also reek of pollution, and from the air, they look like lesions.

Second, the native slaves. The guide claims these Selkath are just intelligent enough to be good servants, but every one I have met appears to be as dumb as a bantha and twice as stubborn. They are not in any way "willing to serve," at least not without being told at least half a dozen times, and what little Basic any of them understand seems to be used only for insolence.

Third, I have yet to see a single "gourmet restaurant" that wasn't infested with spacehopping low-lives out to take my money. When I did finally receive my meal (two hours after I ordered it), it was infested with water lice. Your chef claimed it was seasoning. I also witnessed with my own eyes a dealer in your casino who was cheating at sabacc. If your dealers *must* cheat at cards, please at least train them well enough to cheat without insulting my intelligence.

Finally, the facilities-how old *is* this place? Your guide claims that Ahto opened to visitors a little over ten years ago, but if that's the case, no one's performed a thorough cleaning or maintenance checkup since then. It might have been more pleasant to stay on a Selkath raft-town. Your floating resort leaks, for one thing, and the elevator leading to the underwater viewing dome has been out of operation since we arrived a month before. In other places, the walls are overgrown with some kind of smelly aquatic plant life that caused my mate to break out in a rash-which I expect you to pay to have treated.

We will not be returning to Ahto Luxury Resorts. Please consider this letter your notification that I am willing to initiate legal proceedings if necessary.

- Zavol Shan, Bungalow 17

Part 2: Whatever Happened to the Selkath?

The halt of significant kolto production that caused the rapid departure of Mana'an from the galactic stage and virtually ended contact with the Republic sent the planet spiraling into a technological decline. Most of the native Selkath eventually abandoned Ahto, the floating city that had been constructed almost exclusively for the use of off-worlders, and returned to living in the depths. After less than hundred years, the planetary government completely collapsed. Young warlords with no memory of Mana'an's era of economic prosperity fought among themselves, and within another hundred years had broken Selkath society into tribal clans.

When the Imperials arrived with thousands of aquatically trained stormtroopers and a pair of Star Destroyers, the Selkath had become so primitive that a few blasts of the energy weapons caused entire clans to swear fealty to the Empire. But to be on the safe side, the commander of the expeditionary forces ordered the deployment of depth charges dropped from orbit to wipe out the underwater villages, towns, and cities wherever they could be found-after the most stubborn Selkath in the clan had been executed with their kin and the rest rounded up as slaves.

During their period of Imperial subjugation, most Selkath are broken, oppressed people who no longer have any hope that their lives will improve. Unable to return to the sea lest they incur the wrath of the Empire (which maintains a pair of Star Destroyers in the system, unusual to say the least for a relatively minor resort planet), they have been forced to live in floating shantytowns that can be found just a few kilometers from Ahto on all sides. As far as the Empire knows, Mana'an's entire native population has been forced from the depths, humiliated, and utterly demoralized.

As far as the Empire knows.

Of course, the complimentary copy of the Guide to Beautiful Mana'an every tourist receives has a slightly different take on the Selkath.

Note: Our Hutt visitors are encouraged to enquire about our special gourmet meals not open to the general public. If you like the way the Selkath serve you, wait until one is served to you by Alhond Robari, head chef of the Firaxa Room.

Though their origins were lost to history when Manaan fell into economic decline, the Order of Shasa has protected the Selkath for thousands of years. According to their own legends, the order was founded by a Selkath that had studied with the Jedi, or perhaps the Sith. With no input or influence from either group once the world was abandoned by the rest of the galaxy, these Force adepts have had to find their own way through the gray areas between darkness and light-but always with the ultimate safety of the Selkath people in mind.

Unfortunately for the Manaan natives, even the order was powerless to stop the initial Imperial assault on the planet. Their numbers were simply too small and their understanding of the Force too limited. Yet they continued to train in their secret base in the ruins of an ancient underwater mining facility, awaiting the moment when they would be able to strike back and drive the invaders off their home-world.

Not long before the Battle of Endor, a stranger came to Manaan-an offworlder seeking to meet with the secret Order of Shasa. The fact that this Human even knew of the Order's existence was unsettling to them, but he brought them valuable information about Imperial troop movements and guard schedules that gave them their best chance in memory to rid the planet of the Empire. After the battle, the Human returned with an offer of alliance that would make the Order stronger than ever.

Excerpted from *The Battle of Ahto: A Memoir* by Fewash Welko

Translated from the original Selkath

We couldn't begin to guess where the visitor had gotten such extensive information, but it was readily apparent even to the rawest initiate that he was steeped in the Force. He knew everything about our Order, and found us without the slightest difficulty. And though he attempted to hide his identity from us in a dark hood, the rebreather he wore marked him as an offworlder, which on Manaan meant a Human. A Human who was more than willing to help us attack the Imperial invaders, and asked only for our trust in return.

As we discovered, the strange Human's information was not just good-it was perfect. Ahto's guard complement had just been replaced with raw recruits from their academy. According to our visitor, Manaan and her people were considered so unimportant that the Empire was no longer bothering to send more than a single veteran per platoon with each troop rotation.

We struck on the first night of duty for those new guards.



A dozen teams of the Order's finest warriors-two hundred of us in all-entered Ahto through the resort's waste disposal system so that our presence would not be revealed until we chose to reveal it ourselves. Under normal circumstances, wallowing in that fetid water would have been unbearable, but the stranger had told us it would not affect us-and because he said it, it was true. It wasn't until I was out of the pipes that I realized he must have used the Force to bolster our confidence.

Could it be? Had the legendary Jedi returned to aid their brothers in the hour of need?

Once inside, the guards didn't stand a chance. Many were cut down where they stood in the initial attack, killed silently and with patience. By the time the others figured out what had happened, their commander had already issued the order to evacuate what was left of his forces to one of the mighty space vessels that swam the sky above Mana'an. They left so quickly, they apparently forgot about the tourists that had taken refuge in their cabins, state-rooms, and anywhere else they thought they could escape us. Then something . . . happened.

We were prepared to allow the tourists to leave. The Human tourists were unarmed and terrified, and I could feel their fear like a palpable thing. I could taste it like a raw gizka steak in my mouth. I myself was only a few steps away from a Human female and her hatchling, ready to guide them to the docking bays personally if necessary.

But I did not.

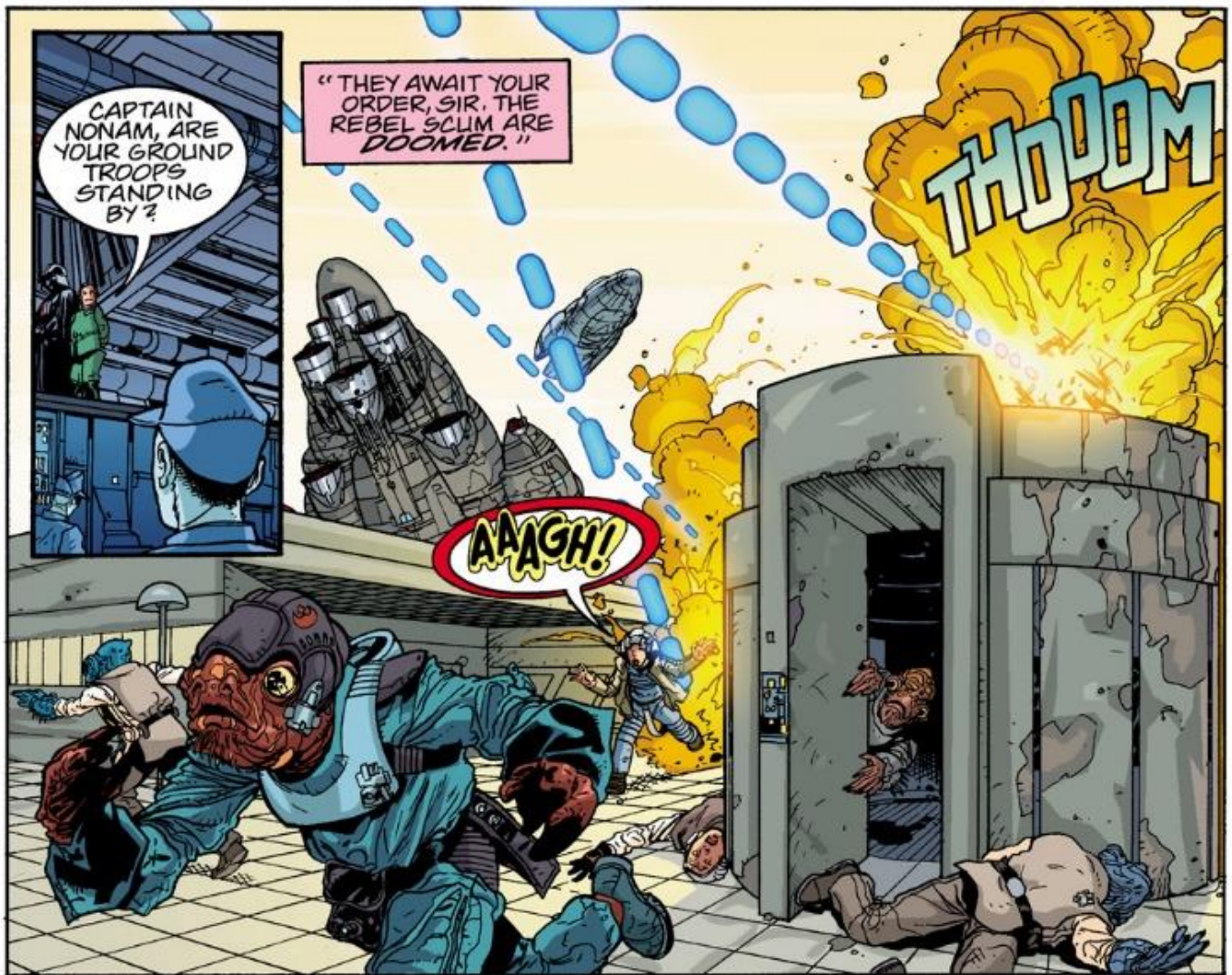
As soon as I reached my hand out to the Humans, I noticed that I had drawn my fira without thinking. As the realization struck me, I was seized by the need for blood. That is the only way I can describe it—suddenly, I *needed* to see the blood of my foe on the fira blade, wanted to taste it, wanted nothing more than to slice these Humans and everything they represented into quivering lumps of flesh and bone. I was no longer a Selkath, I was a firaxan shark, existing only to kill and consume. And I did. We all did.

The strange Human returned when the grisly work was done. He strode through the carnage without stopping, ignoring the bodies, the death rattles and last gasps of the unarmed Humans we'd murdered in cold-blooded revenge, and the shocked disbelief on our own faces at the realization of what we'd done. When he reached me, he drew back his hood, revealing a helmet as black as the Hrakert Rift. I felt my fingertips burning, and realized I was spontaneously generating venom.

"Stranger," I asked, "What have we done? We are not murderers. We are warriors. Those troopers deserved this, but—forgive us, stranger. We could not control ourselves. We are not worthy to be the students of a Jedi."

"The Jedi are dead. But you are strong," the stranger replied in a throaty growl that resonated weirdly in his helmet and my own head, as if he was speaking from two directions at once. "You sought revenge, the most natural thing in the galaxy. And now that you have set down that path, forever shall it guide you. We serve the same master now, you and I. And when you are ready, you will be unleashed at our master's discretion." He placed a gloved hand on my shoulder and added, "Revenge will be your guide."







THIS IS TAK
BASE TO ANYBODY
OUT THERE...**PLEASE**...
WE'RE UNDER IMPERIAL
ATTACK... THEY'RE
EVERYWHERE, THERE WAS
NO WARNING...

**TOTAL
DEVASTATION!**
THEY BROKE THROUGH
OUR **SHIELDS**... THEY
BROKE THROUGH OUR
SHIELDS!

WREEEEECH



CHUD

AAAARGH!

WE'RE CLEAR, CAPTAIN BOK,
NO PURSUIT BY IMPERIAL
FIGHTERS, PREPARING TO
JUMP TO HYPERSPACE,

PAKOUKOU
BE **PRAISED!**
GO TO LIGHTSPEED
AS **SOON** AS
POSSIBLE!



COMM CONNECTION
WITH THE LOWER
DECKS IS GONE, SIR...



...BUT THAT'S ALL
THE DAMAGE WE TOOK.
WE GOT OFF LIGHTLY.



BOOOM



OUR WEAPONS
ARE USELESS
AGAINST IT!

THE
JUMP TO
LIGHTSPEED!
ABORT!

PING PONG



IT'S TOO LATE, SIR,
WE'RE ENTERING
HYPERSPACE NOW.



HYPERDRIVE
DISENGAGED,
COORDINATEZZ
REACHED.



ENTERING HUTT
SZYSTEMZZ...
DANGER...
NAVICOMPUTER
OFFLINE... ZZ...

...DANGER...



WARNING...

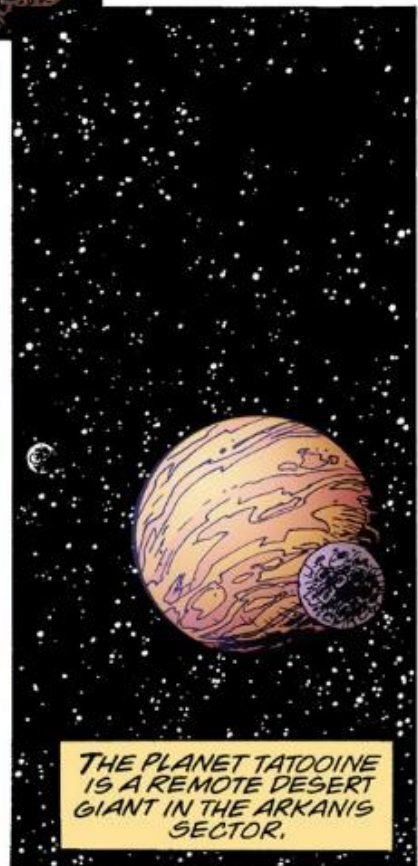


ENGINE FAILURE
COLLISZZION
IMMINENT...
DANGER...



DANGER...
DANG--

CRUMPH



THE PLANET TATDOINE
IS A REMOTE DESERT
GIANT IN THE ARKANIS
SECTOR.

A WRECKED SPACECRAFT CAN LIE
BURIED IN ITS SHIFTING SANDS
FOR YEARS. GIVEN TIME, THOUGH,
NATIVE SCAVENGERS WILL LIKELY
UNCOVER IT.

EVEN THOUGH SOME
THINGS SHOULD BEST
BE LEFT BURIED...

RUBUMBLRUMBLRURBL

RRURBURLRUMBLRRUBML

RUUMBLBUMBRL

HLUH?
WASSAH?
WHA--

AAAAGH!





HUF!
HUF!

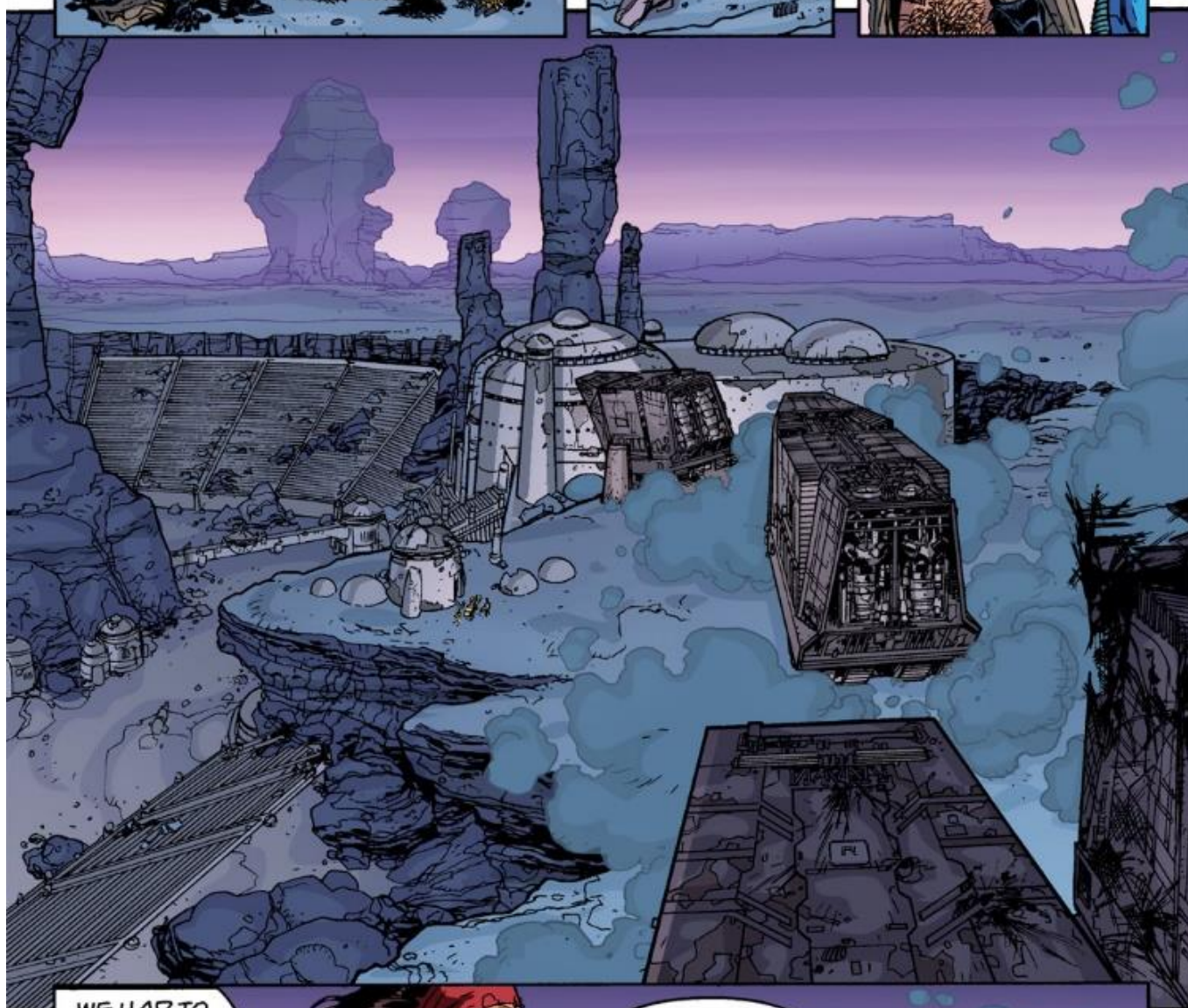
THAT WAS
CLOSE!



YEAH!
TOO CLOSE
FOR MY
SWOOP!



JAWAS!
THOSE
LITTLE
PLUNKS ARE
GONNA
PAY!



WE HAD TO
HOCK OUR
BLASTERS
FOR--HEY!
WHAT THE--



--THEY AIN'T
STOPPIN'!

THIS IS
GONNA BE
LOUD!







I MEAN, HOW *DUMB* D'YA
THINK WE ARE? AIN'T
NO SUCH *THING*! I
AIN'T *WRONG*!



CHEEN!

C-CHUK
K-K-EETH!



AIEEEEE!

THEEK!

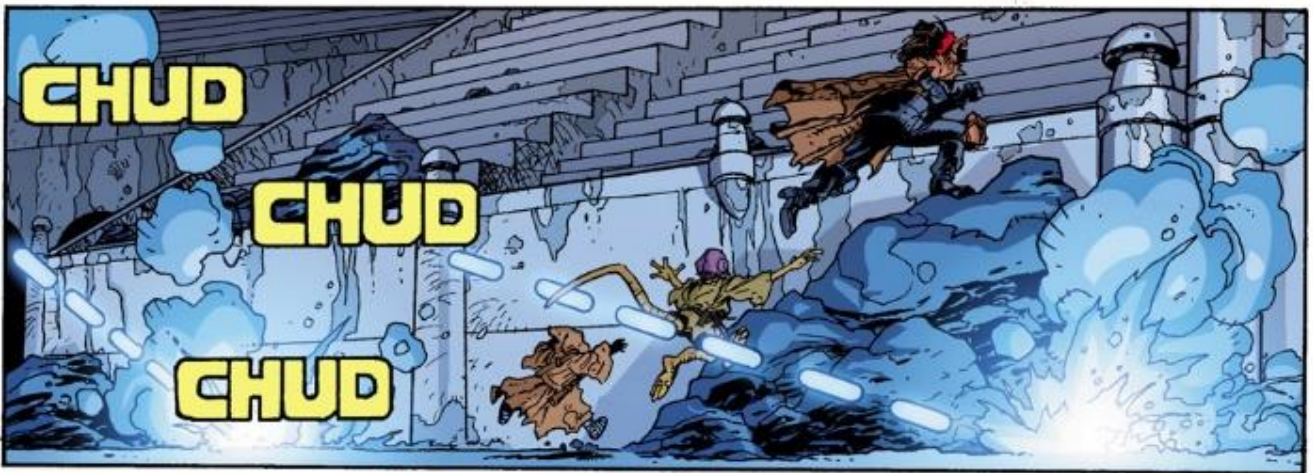


OH, NO!

≡sigh≡
WRONG
AGAIN.

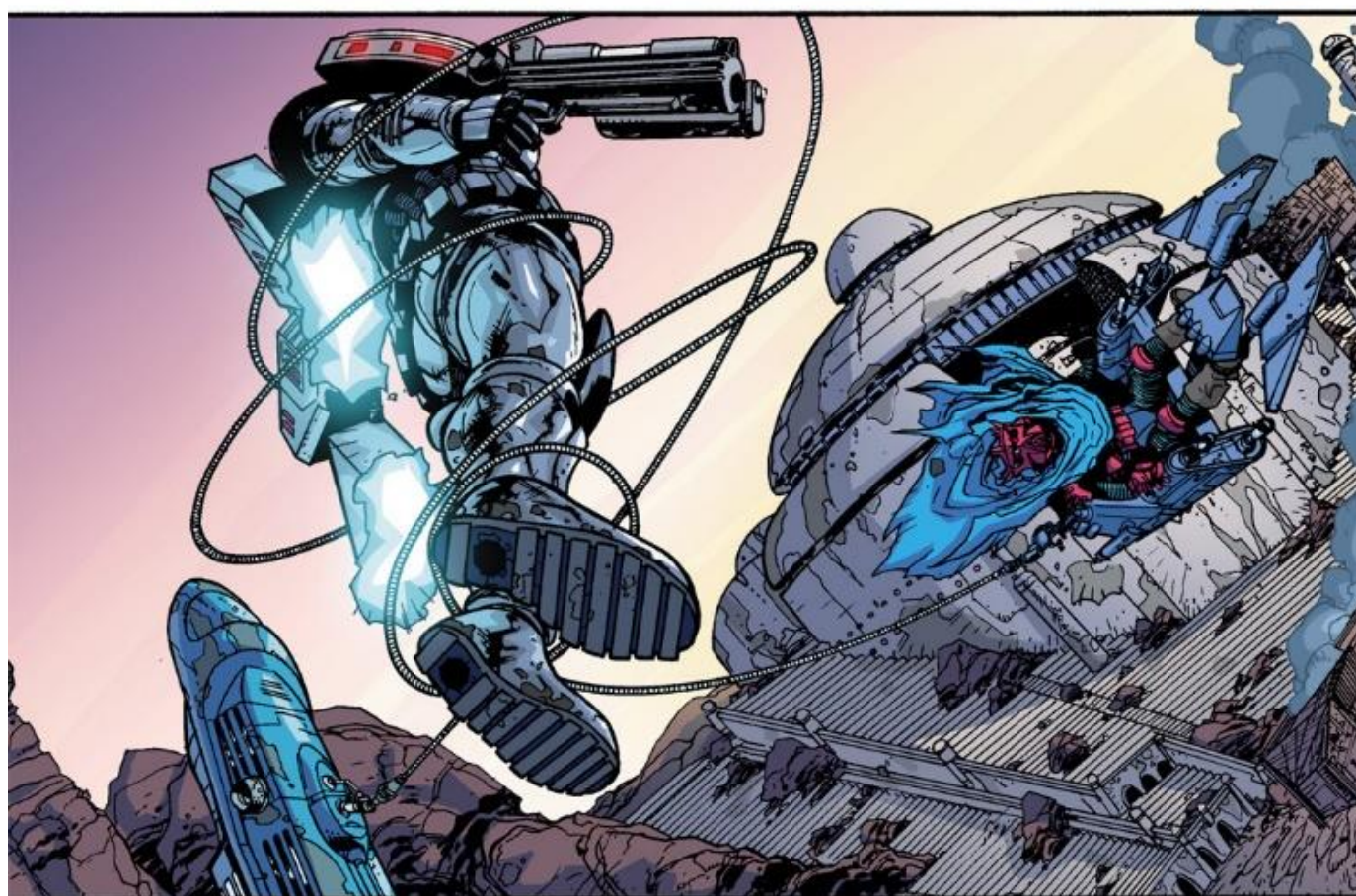








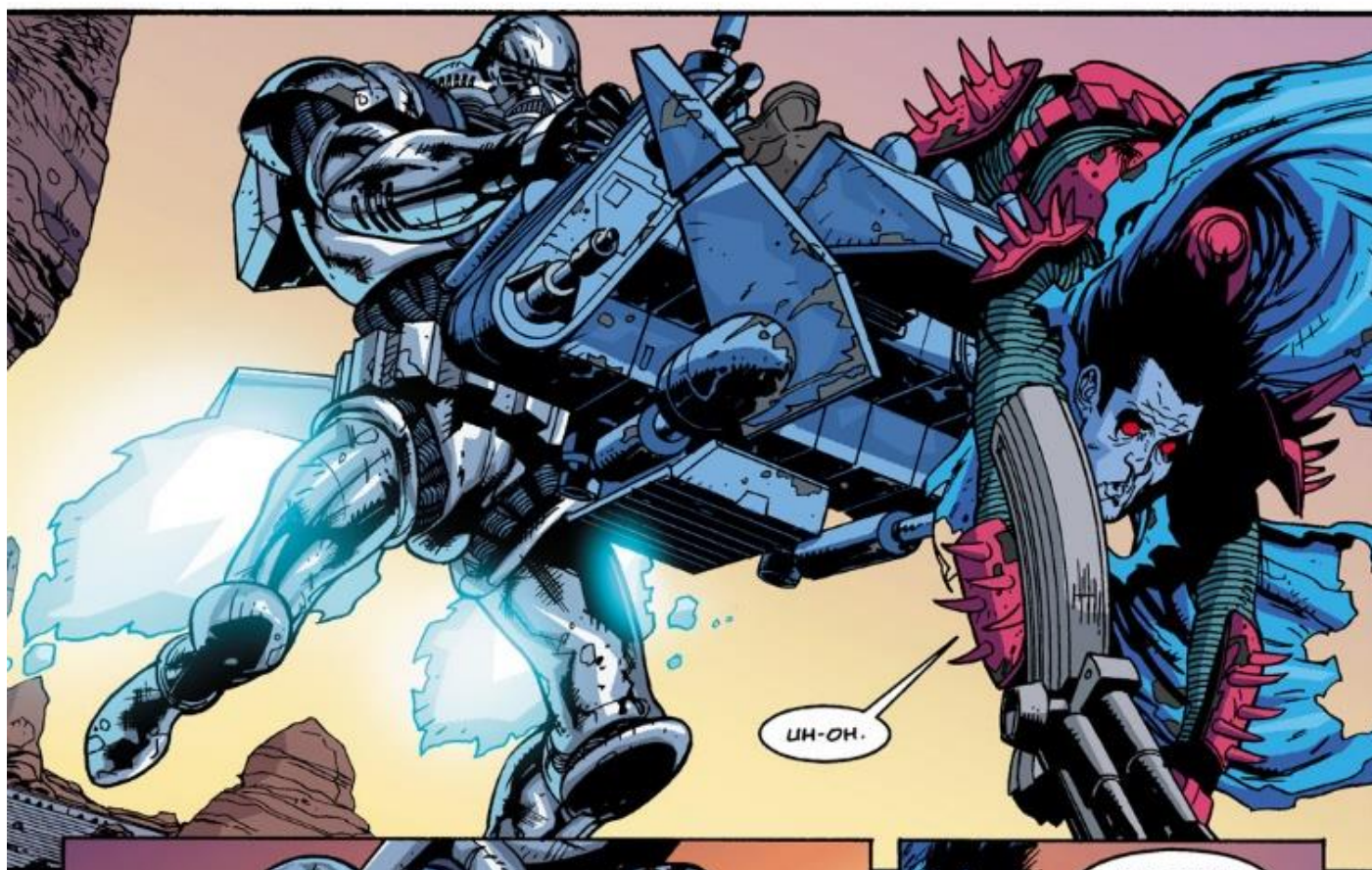


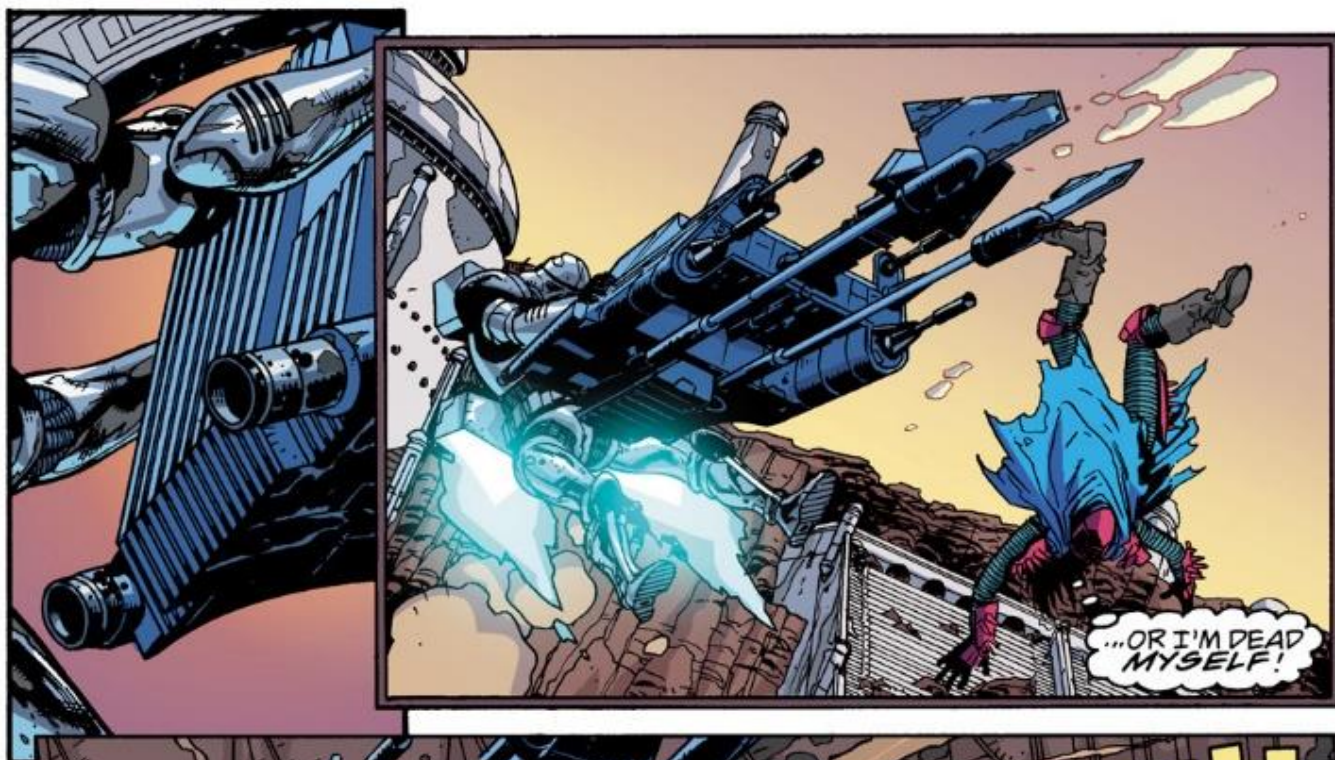
















WELL,
I'LL BE...



...THEY AIN'T
SO USELESS
EITHER!

MAYBE
NOT, BUT THAT
'CRAWLER'S HAD
IT! SHE'S GONNA
BLOW!



RUN!





HUUUHN.

UHH, WHAT'D HE SAY?

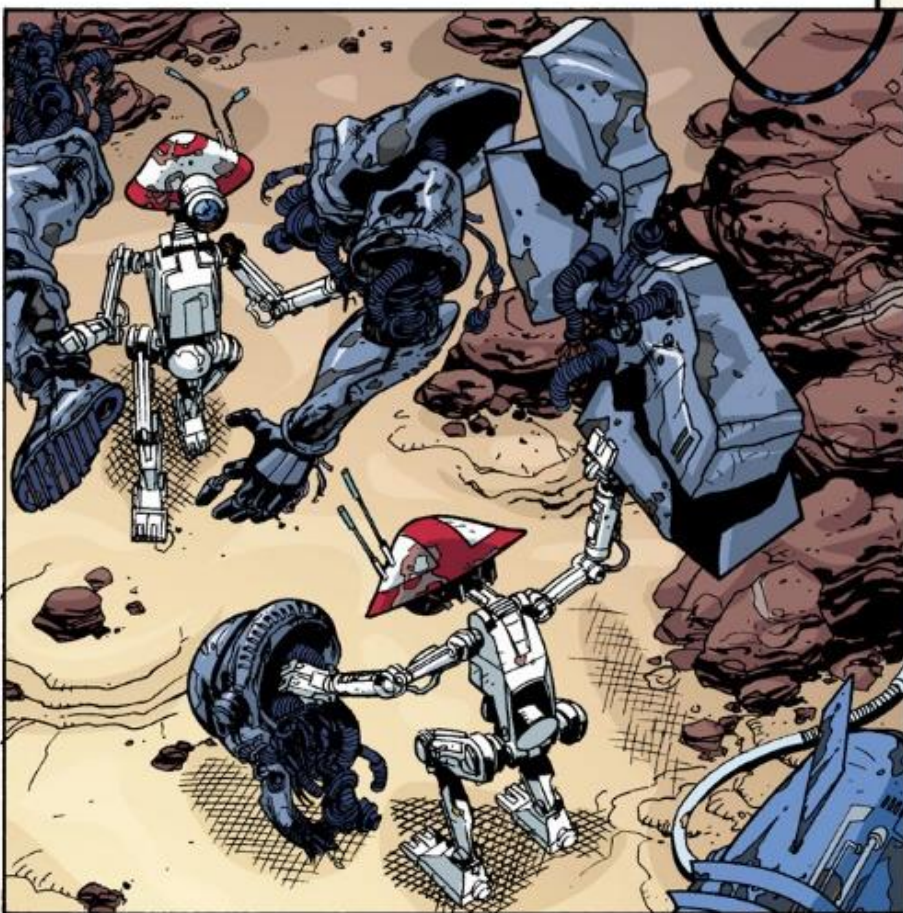
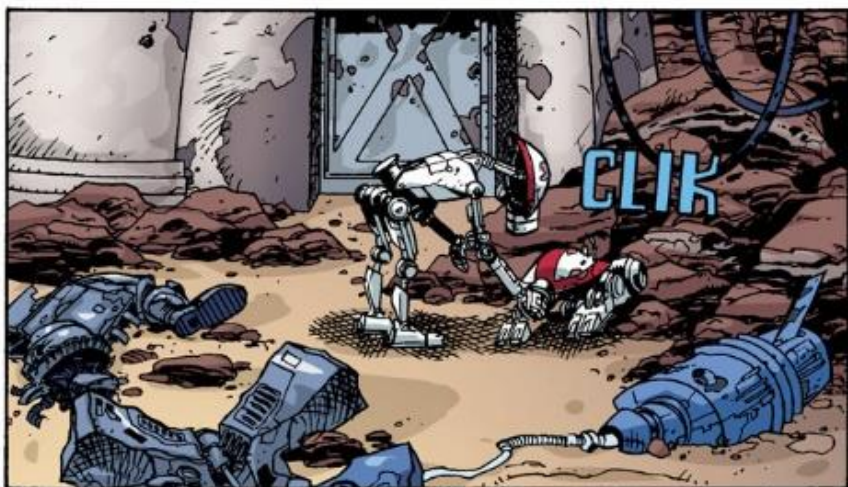
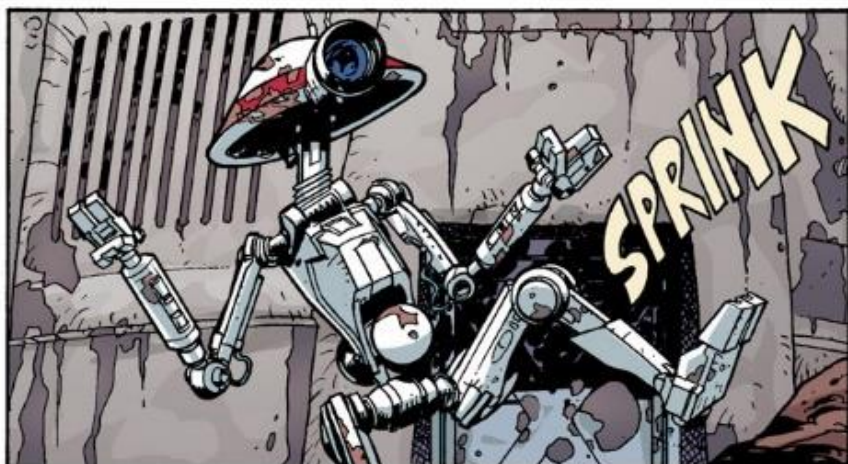


GREAT, ANOTHER FEEB TO DRAG AROUND,

HEHEH. RUSTBUCKET BLOWED UP **REAL** GOOD!







Dark Forces

A STAR DESTROYER — the *Executor*

The massive ship moves into frame. ANOTHER SHIP of respectable proportions cruises alongside. TIE FIGHTERS zoom toward the *Executor*. Their destination: home planet of the city of Talay, a secret Rebel base.

CUT TO:

INT. *EXECUTOR* — MAIN BRIDGE

DARTH VADER addresses GENERAL MOHC, a soldier from the old school who prefers mechanized combat troops over antiseptic, hands-off weapons such as the Death Star. Its failure is his opportunity.

VADER

The Emperor has approved your test demonstration, General Mohc.

MOHC

Thank you, Lord Vader. What I unveil today will mark a new era for the Empire. We will be able to decimate the Rebels just as we did the Jedi Knights. At last the Emperor's war will be filled only with the glory and beauty of decisive victory.

VADER

A noble cause, General. I hope the demonstration lives up to your claims. Proceed.

MOHC

With pleasure. (beat) Dark trooper release.

CUT TO:

INT. *ARC HAMMER* — DARK TROOPER LAUNCH TUBES

Several canisters load with troopers and drop into position.

IMPERIAL (V.O.)

Primary drop line. Engage. Drop Line One, Two, Five, and Nine. Release.

CUT TO:

EXT. *ARC HAMMER* — LAUNCH BAY

Multiple canisters fire from the bay, spreading out and making an aggressive descent to the planet below. The canisters leave fiery streaks as they enter the atmosphere, then explosive bursts ripple the planet surface.

CUT TO:

INT. *EXECUTOR* — MAIN BRIDGE

Darth Vader watches the attack from the bridge window.

VADER

Very impressive, General. The Emperor will be most pleased. Continue with your project.

MOHC

Certainly, Lord Vader.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. DEEP SPACE

AN ARMADA OF REBEL SHIPS surrounds a REBEL FRIGATE. KYLE'S SHIP weaves through the traffic and prepares to land.

CUT TO:

INT. FRIGATE COMMAND ROOM

SENATOR MON MOTHMA greets KYLE. She stands beside a hologram unit.

MON MOTHMA

Thank you, Commander, for responding at such short notice. The Empire has been keeping us on the run since the destruction of the Death Star.

The hologram blinks to life and a blurred image hovers at the center. A Rebel officer is vaguely visible floating in space. Static breaks up the image.

MON MOTHMA

Five days ago the Empire attacked one of our secret bases in the city of Talay.

REBEL (ON SCREEN)

This is Tak Base to anybody out there ... please ... we're under Imperial attack ... they're everywhere, there was no warning at all ...

HORRIBLE TECHNICAL SCREAMS are heard in the background of the hologram, followed by the FRIGHTENING SFX SOUNDS of a dark trooper.

REBEL (ON SCREEN)

... total devastation ... they broke through our shields ... they broke through our shields ...

The screen blinks out.

MON MOTHMA

Tak Base was destroyed in minutes. Many innocent people in the surrounding city as well as the Rebel staff were killed. Intelligence thinks that this may be an act of retaliation for the destruction of the Death Star.

Kyle studies the screen.

KYLE

Interesting. This looks like it could be a normal Imperial attack — except for those sounds.

MON MOTHMA

Very perceptive, Commander. I know you understand that all we discuss here is classified.

The holograph returns, displaying an image of CRIX MADINE.

MON MOTHMA

This Imperial officer, Crix Madine, wishes to defect to the Alliance. He has supplied us with information on the development of a new Imperial weapon. Those sounds you heard, we believe, come from that weapon — a new type of stormtrooper, the dark trooper.

KYLE

A new stormtrooper that can take out a Rebel base that quickly?

(beat)

I should've kept working for the Empire.

MON MOTHMA

The Rebel Command is not taking this lightly. They have authorized me to hire you to find out if there is a threat, and if there is, to shut it down.... That is, if you are still on our side.

Kyle pauses, pondering his options.

KYLE

This could be interesting ... All right, I'm in. But I think I'll need some help on this one. I want Jan Ors as my mission officer.

MON MOTHMA

Certainly. Then I will let Jan brief you further on your mission objectives. Thank you, Commander, and may the Force be with you.

CUT TO:

EXT. DEEP SPACE

KYLE'S SHIP takes off from the Rebel frigate, leaving the other Rebel ships behind.

And so you as Kyle Katarn — with the offscreen guidance and camaraderie of Jan Ors — set out to find and destroy the dark troopers, the Empire's newest and most formidable weapon. Each mission now brings you inexorably closer to a final, cataclysmic confrontation with these dark forces of ultimate destruction.

MISSION II

MISSION PROLOGUE GRAPHICS. Mission specialist Jan Ors briefs you on your next mission entitled Talay: TAK Base: After the Massacre.

JAN ORS

It's good to see you, Kyle. Good job on Operation Skyhook, the Rebels were very impressed. Now it's back to mission hopping, just like the old days.

Rebel command has made a brief reconnaissance of the area and it's swarming with activity. The power is still down in the city so some of the systems are going to be down as well. You'll need to find the main hydroelectric power generator and get it back online.

The Empire usually gets sloppy after a major offensive, so we may be able to find evidence or leads about this new "dark trooper" we've been hearing about through Crix Madine. His contacts inside the Empire will help us follow up on anything you may pick up. Good hunting, Kyle.



CUT TO:

EXT. LANDING PLATFORM — TALAY TAK BASE

KYLE'S SHIP, Jan at the helm, lifts off from the planet and zooms out of sight.

You as Kyle are left alone to your task. You enter the former Tak base looking for a power generator to illuminate the place so you can find some clue to the dark troopers. What that means is a broken repeater rifle abandoned by the dark troopers during the massacre — and which no one has ever seen the likes of. Jan is automatically summoned when you grab the rifle and you head back to the landing area for pick-up. Having found the busted rifle, your next task is to find out what it means.

MISSION III

MISSION PROLOGUE GRAPHICS. Jan briefs you on your next mission entitled Anoat City: The Subterranean Hideout.

JAN ORS

That thing you found was a weapon of some sort — too large for a human being to use. Most likely it's a prototype weapon for the dark trooper.

I found the symbol "M.R." on the barrel — the signature of an infamous weapons specialist named Moff Rebus, a real character known for paranoia and extreme loyalty to the Empire. He may be our next lead to the dark trooper.

Rebus has hidden himself somewhere deep within the sewage system under the city of Anoat. He has engineered an elaborate series of drain gate switches designed to thwart any intruder from discovering the route to his lab. First, activate these switches, then your search for Rebus may begin. Beware, it is likely that Rebus has surrounded himself with guard droids, and the largely unexplored sewer maze may hold other dangers as well. Remember, we need you both back alive. I'll have the decontamination shower warmed up and ready.

And so you and Kyle don your mukluks and enter the lovely, chilly subterranean sewer chambers of the planet Anoat. Virtually all of the opposition that you face here are droids, with a few dianogas (sewer creatures) thrown into the scum for fun. After you figure out the sewer system puzzle, you find Rebus and take him back with you for questioning.

MISSION IV

MISSION PROLOGUE GRAPHICS. While Kyle has been hosing off the Anoat sewer ooze, Moff Rebus has undergone in-depth interrogation by Rebel experts. Jan brings you up to date on your next mission: The Planet Fest: Imperial Weapons Research Facility.

JAN ORS

Moff Rebus designed the prototype weapons for the dark troopers. He wouldn't reveal much under questioning, but during one of his rants he revealed: "You shoulda seen the results of our tests on Fest — my repeater's gonna put a lot of holes in a lot of Rebel scum."

Crix Madine has confirmed the existence of an Imperial weapons site on the planet doing metallurgical research on new alloys. Knowing what kind of metals they're using will give us definite clues to the dark troopers.

I'll drop you in an old landing area far outside the base surrounded by rocky cliff areas. Be careful — one bad move and you'll be a crater. The base itself is buried deep within the rock with an access-controlled front encampment that protects it from a strong frontal attack. Find other openings that may provide easier entry. When you have completed your mission, I'll pick you up at the drop point. Otherwise it's just the way you like it — on your own.

CUT TO:

EXT. PLANET FEST

KYLE'S SHIP hovers momentarily after dropping Kyle off, then accelerates out of the area.

You are alone once more, but this time at least you're in the fresh air of Fest. The white stone cliffs are lousy with stormtroopers. Jan always speaks so cryptically, although that phrase "metallurgical research" is a good clue. You're hunting for a hunk of rare metal alloy called Phrik. When you find it, you have to return safely to the drop-off point where Jan sweeps you up.

MISSION V

EXT. GROMAS MOONS

Kyle's ship weaves through an asteroid belt, making its way to the Blood Moon in the Gromas system.

CUT TO:

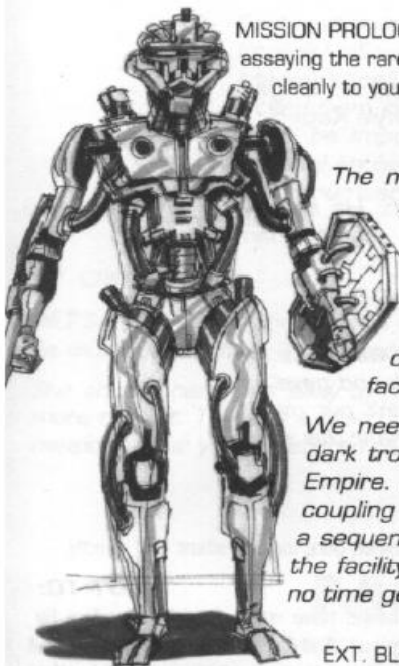
MISSION PROLOGUE GRAPHICS. Kyle has had a nap and some grub, but Jan has been busy assaying the rare and precious Phrik. This is no ordinary rock, as Jan tells you, and it leads cleanly to your next rung on this dark ladder: Gromas Mines: The Blood Moon.

JAN ORS

The metal that you found is called Phrik, a rare material that they must be using for armor-ing the dark troopers.

I tracked the known sources of Phrik and came across a selection of small moons in the Gromas system. It's probably not a coincidence that the Empire has a mining facility in that very system.

We need to take out the facility to slow down the dark trooper project and give us an edge over the Empire. At the main reactor there is an exchange coupling that leads to the central power grid. Place a sequencer charge in this coupling and it will cause the facility to explode. Once the charge is laid, waste no time getting out of there.



EXT. BLOOD MOON — COURTYARD

Jan drops Kyle off in the eerie red light and takes off. Kyle can hear the monotonous drone of mining machines as he begins his search of the facility.

The Blood Moon is also where you and Kyle get your first up-close and personal look at a dark trooper. It's only a Phase One dark trooper (Phase Two is nearly complete and Phase Three is the real McCoy), but even a Phase One dark trooper is more than most mortals can handle. Before that confrontation, however, there's a sequencer charge to set, and afterwards you still have to make it safely back to your ship.

CUT TO:

EXT. BLOOD MOON — KYLE'S SHIP

The ship glides away from the red moon. Behind it an enormous explosion rips the surface and a fire cloud spreads and rises into the atmosphere.

MISSION VI

INT. ARC HAMMER — LAUNCH BAY

GENERAL MOHC points a pistol at CRIX MADINE, the captured Rebel spy. Darth Vader looks on ominously.

MOHC

This contemptible excuse for an officer will no longer divulge any more information to that Rebel, Kyle Katarn.

VADER

Katarn will not be as easy to deal with. He is very resourceful — more resourceful, it seems, than even your dark troopers.

MOHC

I understand the threat, Lord Vader. Katarn was once an impressive Imperial officer, but he was weak and gave up on the struggle for our new order. I wouldn't put much faith in his abilities. Katarn will never come near this ship. My new hire will see to that....



From the darkness behind Madine emerges BOBA FETT, Jabba the Hutt's hired gun, looking silent and deadly.

CUT TO:

MISSION PROLOGUE GRAPHICS. It's obvious Darth Vader and General Mohc have not been idly standing by while Kyle rummages around the universe for clues to the dark trooper project. And Kyle, of course, is not supposed to know yet that the legendary and menacing Boba Fett is on his tail. Kyle's next mission should be the next link on the dark trooper food chain — but Jan has a more merciful idea. It's called Imperial Detention Center, Orinackra: Crix Madine's Fate.

JAN ORS

Bad news, Kyle: Our spy, Crix Madine, has been captured. He's being held at the Imperial Detention Center on Orinackra and awaiting execution. He has been valuable in supplying us with information on the dark trooper, and I think we owe it to him to make a rescue effort.

The Imperial Detention Facility is well secured — hard to get in, even harder to stay alive. There is a switch-controlled shuttle carrier to the facility that will bring you

to the main doors. Inside the complex two main elevators access the lower prison blocks. One goes to the low security levels and down to the command center; the other leads back up to the high security blocks where Crix Madine is being held in the XX block.

Each cell is locked with its own code card carried by an Imperial officer, so first you'll need to find the right card to Madine's cell. Since the high security blocks are controlled from inside the block, once the guards are alerted it will be impossible to penetrate. I suggest you find an optional entrance into the high security block. You'll really be outnumbered here, so rely on stealth rather than firepower.

CUT TO:

EXT. ORINACKRA

KYLE'S SHIP lands near the high walls of the Imperial detention facility. Under dark, leaden skies Kyle sets out for the shuttle carrier and to find his condemned comrade.

The shuttle carrier is easy to find, but finding Madine's cell inside the facility is considerably more difficult. There is a shortcut, however, which saves considerable time and energy on this mission. After you've secured Madine, it's back to the dark trooper hunt.

CUT TO:

Rogue Squadron: Defection On Corellia

Following his escape from Orinackra, Madine fled to his safehouse on Corellia. From there, he requested a meeting with General Carlist Rieekan of the Rebel Alliance to discuss his defection. Rieekan accepted his request and was escorted to Coronet City by Rogue Squadron, under the command of Luke Skywalker. Before meeting with Madine, Rieekan was to attend a conference with Coronet City officials in the Coronet Capital Tower.

"That was never my favorite building anyway."

—Han Solo watching TIE Bombers destroy the Capital Tower

Commander Luke Skywalker and a detachment of Rogue Squadron were assigned to patrol the city in their airspeeders for any signs of Imperial activity. After Wedge Antilles picked up strange transmissions, they flew to the outskirts of the city and found a squad of probe droids. It turned out to be a diversion, however, in which squadrons of TIE bombers attacked the Capital Tower during the Rogues' absence.

Rogue Squadron rushed back to defend the city, while another squadron of bombers moved in on the Tech Center in which Madine was hiding. The Rogues had routed most of the bombers attacking the Tower before they received a transmission from Madine, stating that the Imperials had begun attacking the Center. Skywalker left to protect him, as the rest of Rogue Squadron, along with the new arrival of Han Solo and Chewbacca in the *Millennium Falcon*, took care of the remaining bombers at the Capital Tower.

By the time the Tech Center was safe, the Imperials had deployed an AT-AT walker, which moved to attack the Tower.^[3] It was then that Luke used Imperial defector Davin Felth's advice,^[7] and tripped up the walker with his tow cable. After the remaining bombers were destroyed, the *Falcon* and a Rebel *Lambda*-class T-4a shuttle began evacuating the Capital Tower. At the same time, stormtroopers invaded the beaches in Amphibions, but the Rebel defense batteries managed to keep most of the troops out of the city.

The Imperials resumed their attack on Madine with a pair of AT-ST walkers leading another AT-AT, while a squad of Stormtroopers attempted to break into the tech center. Luke drove the Imperials off, while a second evacuation shuttle arrived to pick up Madine. With Madine's successful defection, and the evacuation of the Capital Tower, Rogue Squadron withdrew from the planet. The Capital Tower was destroyed as soon as the Rebel force departed.

MISSION VII

MISSION PROLOGUE GRAPHICS. It was definitely good to rescue Crix Madine before a premature death. He has much to reveal to Kyle and Jan before this next mission entitled Ramsees Had Docking Port, Cal-Seti: Deadly Cargo.

JAN ORS

Crix Madine informs us that the leader of the dark trooper project is a general named Rom Mohc. You might remember him from your time with the Empire. A decorated soldier in the Clone Wars, Mohc became very prominent during the Emperor's rise to power. He was one of the few generals to oppose the construction of the Death Star because of his distrust of any technology that separates the warrior from battle and engaging the enemy. He's absolutely obsessed with the honor of personal combat.

Madine further reports that the dark troopers have three phases of construction. The first one is the Gromas Mines, which you so effectively blew to bits, where they mine the alloy resource, Phrik. The resulting alloy is then transported to the Robotics Facility, where it is treated and refined. The alloy is then taken to a special cruiser, the Arc Hammer, where the final composition and assembly of the dark trooper takes place. The locations for the Robotics Facility and the Arc Hammer are still unknown.



Our next focus will be to find and destroy the Robotics Facility. General Mohc has solicited the help of an underworld kingpin, unknown to us at this time. This kingpin supplies Mohc with smugglers to move his raw goods to the different facilities. Madine, before his capture, was about to find that one of the routes that the smugglers use starts from Ramsees Hed, a spaceport on the planet Cal-Seti. Placing this tracking device in the engine port at the rear of the smuggler ship should lead us right to the Robotics Facility.

CUT TO:

EXT. RAMSEES HED SPACEPORT

Kyle is dropped outside his target structure.

Find your way into the spaceport, then locate the smuggler ship somewhere inside. Even if you find the ship, it won't be easy to place the tracking device — the place is filled with stormtroopers and other stalwart defenders of the Empire. But if you don't succeed, you'll never know where the dark troopers are being built. And time is running out.

CUT TO:

MISSION VIII

EXT. CAL-SETI

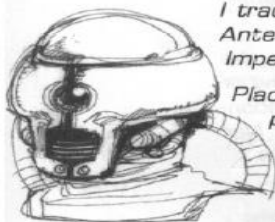
The smuggler ship lifts off from the planet Cal-Seti, leading the Rebels to the second critical location of the dark trooper assembly process.

CUT TO:

MISSION PROLOGUE GRAPHICS. With the tracking device aboard, tracing the smuggler's ship was easy, and now you know exactly where the dark troopers get there Phrik treatments before final assembly. Jan has a short briefing for Robotics Construction Facility, Anteevy: Ice Station Beta. Kyle had better bring his parka because it's going to be cold.

JAN ORS

I tracked the smuggler ship to a remote planet called Anteevy. This frigid planet is lifeless, except for an Imperial construction facility built beneath its icy surface.



Place three sequencer charges in the exchange couplings located in the solution for the Phrik. This should disable the facility. Keep a careful eye out wherever you go; there are highly volatile chemicals used in this facility. I suggest that you find a breathing mask like those used by the Imperials to protect themselves. Also I wouldn't put it past Mohc to have stationed dark troopers in this facility. Battling a few dark troopers should warm you up after your walk through the snow.

It looks like it's freezing out there. I'm glad I'm not you.



CUT TO:

EXT. ICE PLANET ANTEEY

KYLE'S SHIP tilts and lifts away from the icy surface of the planet. Kyle hears the sound of water rushing.

One thing about snow — it makes walking very slippery. First thing you need to do is improve the traction by finding a pair of ice cleats. Then you can battle your way inside the robotics facility. Jan was wrong about one thing. You will definitely meet up with some dark troopers after you place the third charge. And it's Phase Two dark troopers as well as the Phase One jobs you killed back on the Blood Moon. Let's hope you make it back to the landing area in one piece. You won't want to miss the pyrotechnics.

CUT TO:

EXT. ICE PLANET ANTEEY

A beautiful explosion tears at the surface of the planet as Kyle's ship makes its escape.

CUT TO:

MISSION X

INT. JABBA'S SPACE CRUISER

KYLE, surrounded by Gamorrean guards and standing at the edge of a Kell dragon pit, watches as a hologram of Jabba the Hutt blurs into focus.

JABBA

So this is Katarn, the one that has been a thorn in Mohc's side. Your reputation has traveled far. Too bad you have interfered with my affairs.

KYLE

Jabba? What have you done with Jan? If any harm comes to her, I'll personally shove my blaster down your slimy throat.

JABBA

Hoa, hoa, hoa, you talk brave for one who is about to journey down the throat of my favorite Kell dragon.

(beat)

I only wish that I could personally be there to watch you die.

KYLE

I wish you were here also, Jabba. There's nothing like roast Kell dragon.

JABBA

Throw him in!

CUT TO:

INT. DRAGON PIT

KYLE finds himself inside a pit that appears innocuous enough. But the only escape is a switch in the corner of the pit. Who knows what's on the other side?

The objectives here are unusually straightforward: Kill every Kell dragon you can with your bare hands, get your confiscated gear back so you have a fighting chance, relocate the nava card you just stole, then rescue Jan. You're in for a long work day.

This is a mission that never seems to end. But what can be sweeter than shoving it back in Jabba's bloated face?

CUT TO:

EXT. SPACE — JABBA'S SHIP

Kyle's ship blasts safely away from Jabba's cruiser and disappears into the stars.

CUT TO:



MISSION XI

MISSION PROLOGUE GRAPHIC. With Jan and the ship safe, Kyle is back on track, but there's no time to waste. The dark troopers are nearly at full strength. It's nice to have Jan's steady hand and sharp wit back at the controls. Kyle is wondering what the nava card can do for him. He's about to find out as he heads for Imperial City, Coruscant: The Imperial Mask.

JAN ORS

That's another one I owe you, Kyle.

I checked out the nava card you stole from Jabba's henchmen. The card is an Imperial military encrypted navigation device that plugs into a decryption key box to decode nava coordinates for the Nava Computer. This card could tell us where the smugglers are taking their shipments. Unfortunately, the nava card is useless without a decryption key to decode it. That key is located in the Imperial City, in the heart of the Empire. I don't need to tell you this mission is going to be a dangerous one.

Madine, through his inside contacts, has arranged a security code clearance that will allow me to fly into the city and drop you off. Your target will be the Imperial Security Operations building, the center of covert operations and intelligence for the Empire — a maximum security area with all posts alert at all times. The decoder is kept in a large underground vault in the heart of the ISO building. Once you have cracked the central computer, you will be able to insert the nava card into the decoder and write the navigational information on data tapes. Then you will have to get out of the building with those tapes and return to the ship.

CUT TO:

EXT. IMPERIAL CITY — LANDING PLATFORM

Kyle is left alone again, this time in the center of the Imperial City.

It's not just your imagination. The Imperial City definitely has more troops than any other mission. You may be able to find the Nava Computer, but it won't be easy. And just when you think your mission is complete and everything is hunky-dory, you're in for another big surprise. Remember the other mercenary that General Mohc hired a while back? When you try to reach your ship, you won't be alone.

CUT TO:

MISSION XII

MISSION PROLOGUE GRAPHICS. Kyle is closing in on the final confrontation. On this mission — Imperial Fuel Station, Ergo: Smuggler's Hijack — he finds out how to rendezvous with the Arc Hammer and takes the first step to climbing aboard. As Jan informs him, Kyle won't have any backup after this mission. It's just Kyle and his destiny rushing to meet one another.

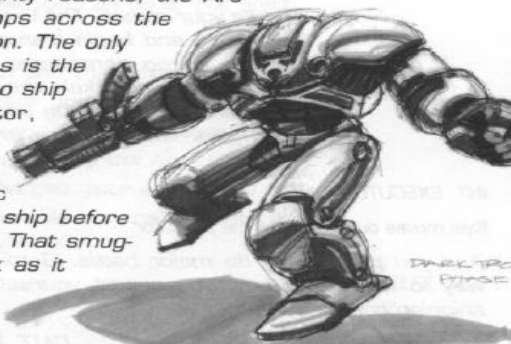
JAN ORS

From the navigational data tapes, I was able to trace the next smuggler cargo ship's route. That route leads to the Super Star Destroyer, the Executor.

We have found that, for security reasons, the Arc Hammer makes periodic jumps across the galaxy, always hiding its location. The only ship that knows those locations is the Executor. The smuggler's cargo ship will meet up with the Executor, which will then hyperspace to the Arc Hammer.

In order to get to the Arc Hammer, hijack the smuggler ship before it meets up with the Executor. That smuggler ship will be a sitting duck as it fuels up at the Fuel Station Ergo. Hijack the ship and (under the guise of a smuggler) meet up with the Executor. There you will sneak onto the Executor and wait until its rendezvous with the Arc Hammer.

For the rest of the mission, I won't be able to provide backup, so be careful. Get your hide back safely. It would get pretty lonely back at the Rebellion without you to worry about.



CUT TO:

EXT. FUEL STATION — LANDING AREA

Kyle is dropped inside a covered docking port.

This maze-like docking port is chock-full of Imperial, weapon-bearing nuts. But your objective is simple: Find the smuggler ship and steal it.

CUT TO:

MISSION XIII

MISSION PROLOGUE GRAPHIC. Jan is gone, but she leaves you with some parting text in your PDA (Personal Digital Assistant — apparently the term has survived a few hundred years since its coining in the early 1990s on the planet Earth). In this mission — *The Executor: The Stowaway* — you begin inside the *Executor*; must take control of the *Executor*, then hitch a ride into the *Arc Hammer* where the fun really begins.

JAN ORS

Now that you're on your own, you won't have me to get you out of trouble. I've programmed your PDA with the mission that will help you with your tasks.

Once on the Executor, you will wait for the right time to make your attack. The Executor will meet up with the Arc Hammer and begin transporting its cargo. Get into one of the cargo containers and ride inside it to the Arc Hammer. Most likely they will halt this operation when they find out you're on board, so you will need to start it up again. That is where your next mission will begin.

CUT TO:

INT. EXECUTOR

Kyle moves out to secure the *Executor*.

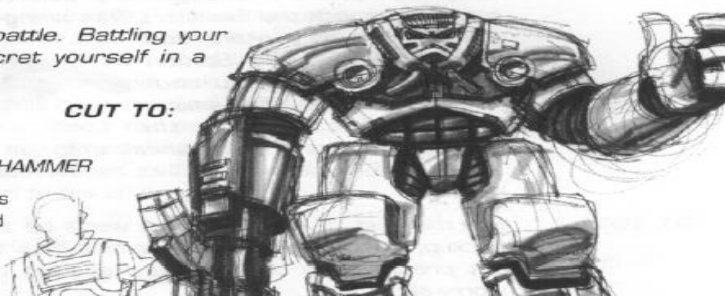
And you prepare to do major battle. Battling your way to the cargo bay, you secret yourself in a shipping container.

CUT TO:

EXT. EXECUTOR — ALONGSIDE ARC HAMMER

The CARGO CONTAINER that conceals Kyle lowers from the *Executor* and glides toward the *Arc Hammer*.

CUT TO:



MISSION XIV

MISSION PROLOGUE GRAPHIC. The Grand Finale, the Big Bang, and it's called *The Arc Hammer: The Dark Awakening*. Kyle's objective seems straightforward enough: Place three big-time bombs around the *Arc Hammer*, escape safely, and watch the Empire's dream of an invincible army of super robots explode into oblivion. Maybe he can finally rid the universe of Darth Vader as well. (Maybe not.)

JAN ORS

The Arc Hammer is a large cruiser that acts both as the construction facility and as a launch platform for the dark trooper. Taking this thing out of commission will be a daunting task. I am confident that you can do it, but don't let that go to your head.

Once on board, you will need to find the three exchange couplings that lead to the main power grid. Place a sequencer charge in each coupling. These couplings most likely will be in a small alcove deep inside the Arc Hammer structure. Once you set those charges, your escape will be by Imperial shuttle. Stay out of trouble and make it back in one piece.

CUT TO:

INT. ARC HAMMER — CARGO CONTAINER

Kyle finds himself in a tight spot with only one way out.

No mission is as easy as it sounds, especially final cataclysmic confrontations in an enclosed space. There are several large and powerful surprises in store for you aboard the Arc Hammer. The Empire won't give up its dream easily. If you succeed in blowing up the Arc Hammer, you've definitely earned it.

CUT TO:

EXT. ARC HAMMER

A shuttle with Kyle in it flies away from the *Arc Hammer* just as several explosions rip through its fuselage.

CUT TO:

INT. EXECUTOR — MAIN BRIDGE

Darth Vader watches the *Arc Hammer* explode and crumble toward the planet below.

VADER

This is an unfortunate setback. The Force is strong with Katarn.

CUT TO:

INT. REBEL FRIGATE — COMMAND CENTER

MON MOTHMA stands before KYLE and JAN. Mon Mothma hands them a MEDAL.

CUT TO:

EXT. DEEP SPACE — REBEL FLEET

Kyle's ship weaves in and out of the victorious Rebel fleet, then flies off into space. What's next for our reluctant hero?

FADE TO BLACK:

ROLL CREDITS.

The Battle of Turak IV

To: Major Arhul Hextrophon, Executive Secretary and Master Historian, Alliance High Command

From: Lieutenant Voren Na'al, Assistant Historian

Regarding: Continuing research into the events surrounding the Battle of Turak IV

"We're asking a lot from Johans' Hammers, but that's why they're here. Besides, to conquer without risk is to triumph without glory and the glory here will be mine!" --Imperial General Maltaz

Sir:

The Battle of Turak IV was the largest Rebel ground assault campaign ever against the Empire. Empowering in its conception. Courageous in its preparation. Catastrophic in its execution. It's with great sympathy that I report to you our costly "victory" at Turak IV. The Imperial Hell's Hammers repulsortank regiment undermined our expectations. After reviewing post-battle analysis, Alliance Intelligence can only characterize the Turak Campaign as a strategic defeat.

Following a series of successful Alliance attacks on Imperial military targets at Aris V and Vohai, Parmel sector had reached its flashpoint. Eighteen months after the Battle of Yavin, with their secret base on Turak IV discovered by Imperial scouts, Alliance Sector Command decided to press their advantage against the incompetent Imperial General Maltaz and strike a ringing blow and rallying cry for the Alliance! But fate intervened through the unexpected arrival of a once legendary Clone Wars-era repulsortank regiment, Hell's Hammers. Under the command of Colonel Zel "Rancor" Johans, the Imperial Hell's Hammers Elite Armor Division devastated years of work by the Alliance in Parmel sector and have established themselves as adversaries to be feared throughout the Outer Rim.

"We controlled both ground and air superiority, or so we thought. Their speed, by the Force, their speed . . . the Hammers destroyed everything we threw at them, overrunning our forward positions, we had no choice but a tactical withdrawal." -- Alliance Commander Torv Keist to Alliance Intelligence during debriefing on the Turak IV Campaign.

The following data was related to me from Commander Torv Keist, Hitak Harrier survivor :

The Turak system was an ideal location for Parmel Sector Alliance to build their hidden base. Located in the remote backwater regions of Parmel sector in the Outer Rim Territories, Turak IV was the only planet with a tolerable atmosphere orbiting the Tyas sun

in the Turak system. A superheated, volcanic planet with a previous history of mineral resources, Turak IV has long since been abandoned by any industrial efforts, and only occasionally frequented by pirates and scavengers.

Alliance scouts found an abandoned mining complex and Parmel Sector Alliance sent engineers to build an extensive secret Rebel base hidden within the Hitak mountain range bordering the Uratai basin. The entire project took months. The only visible structure was a refurbished mineral processing facility located at the base of the Hitak mountains. To protect the exposed base from orbital bombardment, Alliance engineers installed a planetary shield and power generator making any enemy assault possible only by land. Our exposed base was accessible from only two directions, but engineers mined the narrow western corridor and installed a series of fortifications and artillery batteries facing the vast southern lava plains. If the Imperial scout ship detected anything, it was our visible base in the Uratai basin.

"Better one big enemy that you can see than many small ones that you can't" --
Mandalorian proverb.

We were certain that Moff Tallis and General Maltaz were unaware that we had been smuggling materials and equipment onto Turak IV ever since the destruction of the Death Star. We dubbed ourselves the "Hitak Harriers" and prepared for the obvious attack on our Uratai Basin Base. Defended by two thousand and two hundred troops and further reinforced by over three hundred armored assault vehicles including Kelliak Arms & Armor Company Freerunners, Rothana Heavy Engineering TX-130S and TX-130T fighter tanks, and a variety of modified groundcars, landspeeders, combat tramp shuttles and armored repulsorcraft, we knew Maltaz would be unprepared for our numbers.

As an additional safeguard, secreted within the hidden bases in the surrounding mining tunnels to the west and the south, Parmel Sector Alliance held in reserve another four thousand and six hundred troops complemented by mobile artillery, nine squadrons of modified combat airspeeders and three squadrons of short range attack ships.

As expected, General Maltaz landed a full Imperial assault regiment south of our position consisting of four battalions of stormtroopers and army infantry, including two battalions of the Hell's Hammers Armored Division. Intel from our scouts revealed that we still outnumbered the Imperials by a five-to-one parity. So we waited, ready to spring our ambush on the invading Imperials. The Uratai base providing an enticing target for a tactical envelopment.

"Plans change on contact with the enemy." -- Widely known military maxim.

When Hell's Hammers attacked, they attacked with a speed and a ferocity that we were not expecting. We had little intelligence on Colonel Johans' battalions, other than knowing that Imperial repulsortanks were becoming less common in conventional war. But we knew Maltaz could be exploited for his mistakes and Maltaz was in command. The Hammers raced towards our outer defenses, brushing aside our ground troops, eradicating our artillery, and shooting down combat airspeeders and low flying starfighters. Unable to push back Hell's Hammers, we withdrew towards the Uratai Base, and braced for the Imperial reinforcing battalions to charge through our weakened lines. But the Imperial reinforcements never arrived, allowing our enveloping forces to surround the Hammers.

"You will hold your position, Colonel Johans! The Rebel scum are outnumbered. You have two companies in reserve. I'll take the remaining regiment and flank the Rebels from the west. I will be the hammer to your anvil!" -- General Maltaz to Colonel Johans

General Maltaz took the remaining Imperial regiment into the western corridor where they were trapped and decimated by our reserve forces. We thought this turn of events would preserve our victory. It didn't. By the end of the battle, we were reduced to a one-to-one parity with the Imperials, mostly under the protection of the surviving Hammers on the southern plains.

Orders went out immediately for evacuation, and the arrival of Alliance naval forces provided the protection we needed to escape the Imperial capital ship and its TIE fighters before Moff Tallis could send additional reinforcements.

The following research I uncovered from the Halowan trans-data library:

Posing as a special agent of Fakir sector's Moff, I bypassed the security forces on Halowan and gained access to restricted Imperial files. Accessing data on the Battle of Turak IV, I learned that nearly General Maltaz' entire assault regiment, including the two battalions of Hell's Hammers Armor Division, were destroyed. In addition to the Imperial survivors who sought refuge with Hell's Hammers, only three tanks from Colonel Zel "Rancor" Johan's battalion command survived. Intelligence gathered from TIE fighter patrols surveying the combat zone reported large numbers of Rebel assault vehicles and starfighters scattered across the plains in front of the Hammers' positions. Although suffering the loss of two entire Hell's Hammers battalions, the cost to the Rebel Alliance was even higher. Living up to their motto of "Strike to Kill," the effectiveness of Hell's Hammers against superior odds raised their reputation as an Elite Armor Division and became a source of pride to both Hell's Hammers and the Imperial Army.

Clearly, the arrival of Hell's Hammers was a disastrous development for Parmel Sector Alliance. After discovering the location of the Rebel base on Turak IV, Moff Tallis authorized General Maltaz to lead the Imperial assault regiment, designated Battle Group Turak, to

eradicate the Rebels. However, Tallis also requested that two battalions of the Hell's Hammers be transferred by Imperial Central Command to Turcan III and assigned to Battle Group Turak.

"Anything described as an 'easy mission' is probably an ambush." -- Lesser-known SpecForce maxim.

Under Maltaz's orders, Hell's Hammers engaged the Rebel Base from the south, effectively destroying all fixed Rebel artillery, pushing back the Alliance troops and securing their forward positions. Awaiting support from reinforcing infantry, General Maltaz took six out of the eight remaining companies from the two reinforcing battalions and moved them west, intending to flank the Rebel base from behind the mountainous ridges and through the exposed narrow pass. Once Maltaz broke his regiment into two forces, the Hitak Harriers sprung their trap, launching wave after wave of Rebel forces counter-attacking from hidden bases high in the volcanic Hitak mountains. Destroying their reinforcing companies, Hell's Hammers were cut off by the Rebels and found their entire force of one hundred and four Ubrikkian Imperial repulsor tanks and Gorm Talquist S-1 "Firehawk" heavy repulsor tanks surrounded.

Underestimating the size of the Rebel forces, General Maltaz ordered the Hammers to hold their positions, and pushed forward hoping to seize the Rebel base. Caught between the mined western corridor and unable to rejoin Hell's Hammers forward positions, the remainder of Maltaz' command found themselves heavily outnumbered and subject to concentrated attacks by armored Rebel assault vehicles, starfighters and ground forces. Equally outnumbered, the Hammers suffered heavy losses but inflicted four times the damage on their attackers. By the time the order came to withdraw, there were few Hammers left to receive it.

The Battle of Turak IV is currently viewed as Hell's Hammers only major defeat, however, the Battle of Turak IV served as a propaganda victory for the Empire, raising Hell's Hammers accomplishment there to a legendary status. A major threat to Alliance interests throughout the Outer Rim, Imperial Central Command has reassessed Hell's Hammers, determining the Division to be crucial to suppression efforts, and has issued an order to rebuild Hell's Hammer Elite Armor Division to full regimental strength, granting Colonel Zel "Rancor" Johans' first class priority for fire support, material and troops.

"The Empire can always muster superior numbers, and those forces almost always have superior equipment and superior training. So don't get into a slugging match with the Empire, they'll win every time. Generally, Alliance ground troops will win through careful choice of mission objectives, guerilla tactics, and bravery under fire. If you can't achieve your

objectives quickly, against little opposition, you probably can't achieve them at all." --

General Crix Madine advising Alliance High Command

A pivotal battle early in the war with the Empire, the Battle of Turak IV demonstrated convincingly that Alliance forces should not engage in conventional war with Imperial units. Although a victory for the Rebel Alliance, it broke the back of the Allied resistance in Parmel sector for years.

Elite Armor Unit: Hell's Hammers

Introduction

Formed during the closing stages of the Clone Wars from armor units of the Old Republic, Hell's Hammers have served the Empire in a large number of actions in the Outer Rim Territories. Used initially to crush opposition to the New Order, Hell's Hammers are now engaged in eradicating Rebel outposts, subjugating planets with Rebel sympathies, and in forcibly bringing reluctant worlds into the Empire.

Originally created as a regiment, losses suffered in countless campaigns have reduced the unit's strength to little more than a battalion. Even so, Hell's Hammers continues to strike fear into all who oppose the Emperor's will.

Often working in tandem with stormtrooper strike teams, the Hammers are frequently deployed to crack open the outer defenses of Rebel outposts. They clear a path into a base by brushing aside Rebel ground troops, eradicating gun emplacements, and shooting down enemy airspeeders and low flying starfighters. Stormtroopers or regular Army troops are then able to enter the confines of a base directly from their transports.

The Hammers have also seen action in more traditional armor engagements, where they are used to spearhead assaults into enemy-held territory. Equipped with the most powerful repulsortanks in the Empire, the Hammers are capable of destroying or over-powering most of the ground-based opposition they encounter.

Being able to travel fast, the Hammers are a hard-hitting assault force with a reputation for getting results at any cost -- a reputation that they well deserve, for their long history is not free from the taste of defeat.

On more than one occasion the Hammers have been thrown against superior forces without effective backup. In all of these cases the Hammers achieved their initial objective, but the lack of adequate infantry support made it impossible for them to maintain their position.

The action on Turak IV, while being marked as the Hammers' worst defeat, is also a great source of pride to the unit. Here two battalions of the Hammers' tanks swept across the lava plains to capture the Rebel Army's forward positions. But, because of the incompetence of General Maltaz, commander of the Imperial Army on Turak IV, they were cut off by Rebel forces counter-attacking from hidden bases high in the volcanic Hitak mountains.

General Maltaz ordered the Hammers to hold their position, and attempted to halt the Rebel advance with the remainder of his command. Heavily outnumbered and subject to concentrated attacks by armored Rebel speeders, starfighters and ground forces, the Hammers suffered heavy losses. Even though their tanks were soon burning fiercely in the hot sulfurous air, the Hammers refused to give ground. By the time the order came to withdraw, there were few Hammers left to receive it. All that remained were three tanks. The rest of the once-mighty force had been turned into smoldering hulks. The two battalions had almost ceased to exist.

Even though two battalions were effectively destroyed, their tank crews did not die in vain. TIE fighter patrols, which flew over the area in the closing stages of the campaign, reported large numbers of Rebel vehicles and starfighters lying strewn across the plains in front of the Hammers' position. The Hammers had paid a high price, but the cost to the Rebel Alliance was even higher. The Hammers had indeed lived up to their motto of "Strike To Kill".

Since that fateful day, the Hammers have operated under strength, with only one battalion able to take the field. While this has reduced the fighting ability of the unit, it has also served to increase its morale. The remaining troops of the unit have an uncanny knack for surviving engagement after engagement. Always bearing the brunt of the assaults, the Hammers have surprised Imperial Command with their ability to keep on going in the face of overwhelming odds.

Once considered an expendable force, the Hammers are now viewed as an essential part of Imperial Command's strategy in the Outer Rim Territories. This position has been attained at a high price as the blood of the unit's tankers has often been spilt unnecessarily by incompetent Imperial officers.

The unit's commander, Colonel "Rancor" Johans, is using the growing prominence of the Hammers to further increase his standing in the Imperial Army. Colonel Johans's proven tactical ability, and the complete devotion of his troops, has enabled him to persuade Imperial command that the Hammers should be allowed more freedom when it comes to campaigns.

Following the successful subjugation of the Yatir, a humanoid race indigenous to Absit and sympathetic to the Rebel Alliance, Johans has been able to convince Imperial Command that the Hammers would be of far more use to the Empire if they were again restored to regimental strength. To this end, intensive training of recruits is now taking place on Brintoon to build the Hammers back up to regimental strength.

Hell's Hammers are destined to play a major role in the Empire's war against the Rebel Alliance.

Organization

Hell's Hammers form an elite force within the Imperial Army. When at full strength, the regiment consists of three battalions and a regimental command group. Two battalions are used to spearhead assaults, with the third battalion being held in reserve to reinforce the front line units as required, or be deployed as the situation warrants.

As the unit is currently under strength, it operates without a reserve, relying on the abilities of its troopers to gain its objectives quickly and effectively. This self-reliance and the growing autonomy of the unit within the Imperial command structure has helped maintain the unit's already high morale. The troopers look to each other and to Colonel "Rancor" Johans, rather than to other Imperial units, for support in times of need.

The experience on Turak IV has led the unit to act independently whenever possible, preferring to plan its own actions rather than catering to the logistical concerns of Imperial Command. If the Hammers were not so successful, this attitude would not be tolerated. But Johans's inspired leadership has led the unit to victory after victory, a state of affairs which Imperial Command is only too happy to accept.

Battalion Organization

The battalion consists of the battalion command and three armor troops, backed up by a reconnaissance troop. The three armor troops are employed to break through and capture enemy positions, relying on the mighty repulsorlift tanks to achieve their objectives. The reconnaissance troop serves a dual role: to probe enemy positions, and to protect the flanks of the armor troops during advances.

Each armor troop is led by a captain and consists of four squadrons. A squadron contains four repulsortanks led by a lieutenant and is the smallest unit employed by the Hammers. Depending on the situation, squadrons may operate independently of their troops or be massed together with other troops to literally "hammer" through enemy defenses.

The tanks are crewed by highly-trained troopers led by a sergeant. The crew is equipped with helmets containing wide-spectrum viewfinders, passive infrared sensors, and computer-linked fire control targeting sensors. Although the tank crews are not expected to fight outside of their tanks, they are equipped with blaster carbines and pistols for defense in the event of a breakdown or being knocked out by enemy fire.

The reconnaissance troop comprises three squadrons of heavily armored airspeeders, and one squadron of fast moving but lightly armored speeder bikes. The reconnaissance squadrons operate independently of each other, allowing them to cover a wider area. The repulsorlift bikes are equipped with a single laser cannon for defense purposes. Their riders are expected to retreat in the face of enemy fire.

Before the armor advances, the reconnaissance troop explores the area ahead reporting on the difficulty of the terrain to be traversed by the tanks, probing enemy positions, and noting the strengths and weaknesses of the enemy. The reconnaissance units are not designed to capture and hold ground. In the event of concerted opposition they are instructed to report on enemy positions and return to the main unit.

When the armor advances, the reconnaissance unit is positioned on the flanks and slightly to the rear of the attack force. In this formation the reconnaissance squadrons are able to keep the armored attack force informed of any enemy troop movements which threaten to cut off the unit or otherwise endanger its advance. In the event of an enemy attack on the flanks, the reconnaissance troop's airspeeder squadrons fight to protect the exposed tanks, but fall back as soon as the armor is able to bring its heavy weapons to bear.

Until the unit is returned to full regimental strength, "Rancor" Johans personally commands the battalion. His command group is therefore larger than would be normally found in a tank battalion. It consists of his personal tank squadron of four vehicles, a communications wagon, and a gun battery.

The gun battery contains four Golan Arms Df .9 Mobile Emplacement Guns, and two Golan Arms Df .1 Spray Blasters. The battery provides fire support and air defense fire for the battalion. The mobile repulsorlift-mounted guns can be rapidly moved into position to protect the battalion during enemy counterattacks, or to add their firepower to the battalion's tanks during advances. The gun battery is a recent addition to the unit, and is indicative of the more independent role that the unit has gained under Johans's leadership.

In addition to the combat troops, the battalion contains 40 support personnel responsible for supplying the unit in the field and for maintaining its equipment. Thirty technicians work on the unit's vehicles, keeping them functioning and repairing battle damage. A group of 10 engineers, equipped with heavy repulsorlift barges, recover disabled and damaged tanks and carry out any field fortifications required.

The unit relies on Imperial starships to carry it from world to world. On arriving in a system, the unit is transported to the planet's surface in armored and shielded landing barges. After landing, the unit quickly moves out to begin its attacks. Usually one of the first units in, the Hammers are also one of the first units to be withdrawn once victory has been assured. This unit, however, gets little rest as it is soon en route to its next assignment.

Brentaal Prepares for Kallea Cycle

By Tanda Marelle

VOTRAD, BRENTAAL: All of Votrad is abuzz this week as the city prepares for an epic performance of the Kallea

Cycle. The classic three-part opera depicts the life of Freia Kallea, the legendary Brentaal explorer who single-handedly charted the Hydian Way hyperlane 3,000 years ago.

Kallea will be portrayed by Vessa Brentioch, Mistress of the Hall and a descendent of the legendary pathfinder. Famed Chandrilan singer Gelod Vothran will play Sival Brentioch, the prominent Hall Brentioch seneschal who financed Kallea's explorations and would eventually marry her. The production will be performed by members of the prestigious Brentaal Hall Conservatory, including the Conservatory Epic Orchestra and the Brentaal Illustrious Choir. Special sound effects will be provided by the Conservatory's antique orchestration said to have been commissioned by Kallea herself.

This grand production is funded by several of Brentaal's most prominent commerce houses, including the Dajaal Family, House Brentioch and Hall Jo'uda. The company has outfitted Votrad Stadium for operatic performances, with more than 100,000 seats and a 500-meter-long stage. No expense has been spared in creating the lavish backdrops, including the rotating Jungle of Nuvar set, a massive edifice recreating the First Hall of Brentioch, and the pyrotechnic-rigged Temple of Imynusoph.

With the premiere only days away, prominent dignitaries from around the Core Worlds and Colonies are arriving. Members of Core Worlds high society and advocates of Human High Culture are flooding Brentaal's posh hotels, spreading their wealth to Votrad's most expensive restaurants and entertainment complexes. The most renown of these visitors are guests of the trading Houses which control Brentaal's vast commerce enterprises. Security is understandably tight. Inspector Zanza Gata of the Imperial Office of Criminal Investigations (IOCI) is in charge of

arrangements. "We have taken every precaution to ensure visitors enjoy their stay on Brentaal," the Inspector said. "The Kallea Cycle is an important part of this planet's—and indeed the Core Worlds'—culture. We want to avoid having anyone's experience marred by the activities of criminal elements."

Interest in the Kallea Cycle was spurred during the past two years by Neile Janna's popular holo, *Kallea's Hope*, which translated the opera into a popular format. Brentaal's Council of Human High Culture began work to bring the Kallea Cycle back to its classical roots. With the help of Brentaal's prominent Houses, this timeless story returns once again as a traditional art form.

Fellowship Files Bounty on Reporter

PORT FYRIN, QALYDON: The mysterious Fellowship of Kooroo has taken out a contract on TriNebulon News investigative reporter Andor Javin for what the group's leaders are calling "a gross injustice against our holy order." Javin's recent report theorized that the ancient shrines the cult reveres were in fact communication arrays used by a species of long-dead scouts.

"How dare such an unbeliever make statements that completely invalidate our faith," High Reverend Massus

Gyne told newsnet reporters. "In taking out a contract on Javin, the Fellowship of Kooroo has declared holy war against this infidel. Although our beliefs prohibit us from partaking in acts of violence, they do not forbid us from encouraging others to engage in such acts, especially when they are in the greater interest of the Fellowship."

Few bounty hunters within any guild have expressed an interest in taking on the assignment, despite the 20,000 credits the Fellowship of Kooroo is offering for proof of Javin's demise.

An Old Flame in Need ...

Wendell Wright-Sims read over the invitation printed on the plastic slip as he approached the entrance to the reception hall.

His Eminence, Kren Blista-Vanee, Imperial Advisor To Our Most August Emperor, Hereby Requests Your Auspicious Presence At A Gala Commemorating The Season's Opening-Night Performance Of The Kallea Cycle.

He handed the wordy invitation to the honor guard, who slotted it through a datareader, then waved him on through.

The reception hall beyond was packed with Coruscant's elite society. If they weren't gossiping in little clutches of people, they were floating around the lavish hall, admiring the Imperial Advisor's collection of art, marveling at the exquisite food, or gazing out the 30-meter-tall transparisteel windows which served as walls and offered an amazing view of the glowing Coruscant skyline.

Still, even with having to sit through the Kallea Cycle's first marathon portion, Wendell was determined to be his usual charming self. That was a part of his job, even if it meant sitting through a tediously droll Brentaal opera.

He made sure his white hair was still in place and straightened this week's designer evening coattails before gliding into the throng. Wendell drifted into one conversation, through a debate and finally out of another discussion, all the while smiling, nodding, shaking hands and basically reinforcing his devotion to those addicted to the choicest spice he so deftly brought to their doorsteps.

"Yes, it's amazing how those performers can sing for five hours straight. They must train their voices for years before they can carry out such a feat of musical daring.

"Lady Comark, what a lovely gown you're wearing this evening. Yes, I'll be sure to stop by and visit soon. Of course, what guest wouldn't bring his gracious host a proper gift?

"How abominable! One would think those Rebels might think innocent lives had some value, but it seems they shall never stop until they're sitting right back here in the old Senate chambers again.

"Certainly you must be joking, Grand Admiral Takel. A scandal years ago involving the late Grand Moff Tarkin and a female aide? I'm sure today's Imperial administration is quite above such improprieties. Oh, and yes, I'll have a package for you next week."

It was the kind of superficial banter Wendell excelled at. As long as he stroked them properly, he would sell enough spice to live extremely comfortably.

Then he saw her, an exquisite vision of beauty. At least that's what he'd tell her. It had been at least two years since they had casually courted. Wendell remembered it as a pleasant time, although he couldn't quite recall why they'd drifted apart. Perhaps it would be worth surviving the five-hour performance of the opera's first portion after all ...

"Why, Mayli Weng," Wendell exclaimed, approaching the woman with the ornate gown and artistically-styled hair. "I haven't seen you since —"

"Since we stopped seeing each other," she casually cut in, disengaging herself from the conversation she was having with several important-looking gentlemen.

Wendell took her hand and gently pressed his lips against it. "A minor technicality," he said smoothly. Mayli didn't realize it — or maybe she just wasn't saying anything — but while they were exchanging small talk, Wendell was slowly easing her out of the main arena of chatting guests toward the more serene sidelines. Mayli silently followed and flashed a polite smile at several acquaintances as they passed. She had dropped her courteous manner by the time Wendell steered her near one of the immense windows overlooking Coruscant.

"Wendell, I don't have time for your romantic advances," she said. "Both you and I have business to attend to at this reception. Our livelihoods depend on affairs such as this. We're accomplishing nothing by opening up old emotional wounds ..."

"I can afford to share some of my time with a friend in need," Wendell coolly said. "You certainly seem upset about something. Upset enough that it might interfere with your intended negotiations tonight anyway."

"My 'intended negotiations' are none of your business," Mayli began. "It's not my fault half my entertainers on Ralltiir are being rounded up as Rebel sympathizers, Governor Snopps on Corulag won't tell those Academy cadets to stop abusing my pleasure hall girls, and the Esselian government wants to cut out the union and regulate the industry there in its own tyrannical fashion."

"Seems like you have a lot on your mind," Wendell said, putting an arm around her shoulder. "Perhaps I can offer a diversion ..."

"I don't want any of your merchandise, if that's all you're offering," Mayli interrupted, making a move to back away. "You know I haven't touched that stuff since I hauled myself off the dance floors."

"As I was saying, perhaps I could offer a diversion by catching up on old times — you know, some fancy culinary tidbits borrowed from a servant's tray, a flask of some Cedrellian aged wine, and thou, so to speak. Non-committal, of course."

"Wendell, at times you can be annoyingly vapid."

"And yet, you must admit, from time to time charm can often be a fulfilling substitute." He began leading her by the hand toward the terrace arches. "Come, walk with me through the balcony garden, and I shall take your mind off your worries with my sonorous renditions of the great Korfani poet, Adranax: 'Why mourn for tomorrow in tears today/When current fleeting hours not long shall stay?/Come stroll with me, we shall find your lost peace/In an old friend's arms and a gentle kiss.'"

Tombat Strikes at Brentaal Banquet

VOTRAD, BRENTAAL: The infamous jewel thief known as the Tombat struck again this week—though his goal was more to embarrass his pursuers than to steal any great treasure.

The incident occurred on Brentaal, where dignitaries and high-profile guests from around the Core Worlds had traveled to enjoy the operatic production of the Kallea Cycle. Several of the more renowned attendees had gathered for a feast at House Brentioch—the ancestral home of the opera's heroine, Freia Kallea. The guests included Mistress of the Hall Vessa Brentioch and Gelod Vothran (lead players in the epic), Maestro Trebian Shullos, Bormea sector Moff Jamson Caglio, Imperial Advisor Alec Pradeux, and, most notably, Inspector Zanza Gata, leader of the IOCI's inquest into the Tombat's activities.

As the assembly sat down to dessert, certain prominent diners quite painfully discovered small quella stones baked within their bowls of shim-bay crispa. These worthless stones are the Tombat's trademark, left in place of the treasures he steals. The incident was a clear indication of the Tombat's criminal prowess—and investigators' inability to capture him.

Although Inspector Gata was overseeing security during the Kallea Cycle, some believe his true intent was to set a trap for the Tombat—one the infamous jewel thief discovered, evaded and revealed. Some observers at the banquet report Moff Caglio publicly upbraided the Inspector for his inability to keep the Tombat from interfering with the Kallea Cycle festivities. Gata declined to comment on the entire Tombat incident. He quickly retreated from newsnet reporters to have a medic check out his broken tooth.

None of the Kallea Cycle lead singers were injured.

THE HYDIAN WAY

Excerpts from the program for the 38:2:13 premiere of Maestro Trebian Shullos's *The Kallea Cycle*, Votrad Stadium, Brentaal, featuring Vessa Brentioch as Freia Kallea, Gelod Vothran as Sival Brentioch, and Amaro Fonteen as Banu Hydria.

To enhance your enjoyment of tonight's program, a summary of the plot follows, with major choruses, duets, and arias indicated. Translations from Old Brentaal will be provided on datapad channel 271.

Act I: The Hall of Brentioch

Act I is light and often comic, driven by the disconnect between Freia and Brentaal society (Chorus: "The Center of the Galaxy") and Sival's deceptions in wooing Freia. **Freia Kallea** is a headstrong daughter of House Kallea whose parents disapprove of her apprenticeship in the Brentaal Spacefarers League. They wish her to marry into a higher-ranking House (**Olun and Henne Kallea**: "A Fine and Proper Place"), but Freia disdains the Houses and the idea of marriage. Her best friend is **Arhul Habea**, purportedly an errand boy for House Brentioch, but really **Sival Brentioch**, the seneschal of that great House. He loves Freia (Sival and Chorus: "The Lady Must Hear") but she refuses his entreaties, saying her destiny lies among the stars (Arhul and Freia: "As Far as Farana").

A brokenhearted Sival decides he will devote everything to ensuring Freia's success (Sival: "All of This for You"). He secretly uses his family wealth to arrange things for Freia, including the use of the scoutship *Hope*, and commissions to knit together the unreliable hyperspace lanes between Brentaal and the Rim. When she sees that the commission extends "as far as Farana," she knows she has a benefactor and wonders who it is (Arhul and Freia: "Credit"). She takes the commission, and soon word comes to Brentaal of her achievements—a clear path through the dangerous Crombach Nebula, a treaty with the Nalroni of Celanon, and the discovery of a reliable route connecting Serenno and Telos (Chorus: "A Daughter of Brentaal"). But her accomplishments come at

the expense of three rival scouts: the Duros **Banu Hydria** and the scheming Neimoidians **Thoax and Farge Osaax** (Freia: "Strange Eyes").

When Freia returns to Brentaal, Sival decides to reveal he is both Arhul and her secret benefactor (Sival: "The Lady Shall Hear"), but she brusquely rejects his servant's request for a meeting. Once again disguised as Arhul, a dejected Sival asks what she'll do now, and Freia replies that for a woman of Brentaal, finding a safe route across half the galaxy isn't enough—so she'll just have to blaze a trail across the other half (Freia: "Half the Galaxy").



Amaro Fonteen as Banu Hydria

Act II: The Jungles of Nuvar

Acts II and III are epic and dark, with the emphasis moving to Freia and her rivals. The action opens with Neimoidian merchants berating Thoax and Farge for their failures and ordering them to eliminate Freia (Chorus: "The Stars Are Ours"), which the cowardly Neimoidians attempt to do by hiring Banu, who refuses (Thoax, Farge, and Banu: "Loyalties").

Freia travels to Denon in search of a shortcut between the Corellian Run and the Rimma. In a cantina she and Banu discuss the perils of the Itani Nebula and the black holes of the Tyus Cluster, with Freia ignoring Banu's pleas for caution (Freia, Banu, and Chorus: "The Safest Form of Passage"). On Brentaal, Sival pines for his love (Sival: "Somewhere in the Dark") amid word of her latest accomplishments. On Malastare, Gran thugs hired by Thoax and Farge imprison Freia (Chorus: "Weak Little Thing"), but she's freed by Banu, who warns the Gran of Brentaal's power and Freia of her enemies (Banu: "Ever Closer").

Freia returns to Brentaal and a reunion with Sival, who extols all she's accomplished and begs her to retire, but Freia refuses (Arhul and Freia: "The Road to Zonju"). Sival debates revealing his true identity, but decides against it (Arhul and Chorus: "The Lady Wouldn't Hear"). She returns to Malastare, where she fails to heed Banu's warnings. Thoax and Farge cripple the *Hope*, which crash-lands on the uncharted world of Nuvar (Thoax and Farge: "A Fine and Private Place").

Act III: The Temple of Imyunosoph

Act III begins on Brentaal, where Freia has been lost for six years and finally declared dead, though Sival, Olun, and Henne refuse to believe it's true (Chorus: "A Daughter of Brentaal [Reprise]"). Thoax and Farge have given up scouring and are now the heads of a Neimoidian trade cartel (Thoax and Farge: "The Stars Are Ours [Reprise]"). Banu has

remained a scout, and still searches for Freia (Banu: "Somewhere in the Dark [Reprise]").

He finds her on Nuvar, grown wild and strange in her exile (Banu and Freia: "The Jungles of Nuvar"). She swears him to secrecy and returns to Brentaal, disguising herself as a Bureau of Ships and Services hierophant to see if her parents and Arhul still mourn her (Freia, Arhul, Olun, and Henne: "All the Vertex on Brentaal"). She then returns to the stars, disappointed that her route has been extended to the Rimma Trade Route, but determined to bridge the gap between the Rimma and the Corellian Trade Spine. She convinces Banu to blaze this final trail with her (Banu and Freia: "One Last Road"). They win through the dust clouds surrounding the Tosste system and reach Terminus. Banu thinks Freia will now retire, but she wants revenge on Thoax and Farge.

Freia lures the Neimoidians to Imyusoph, whose natives seem peaceable, though Freia has become rather high-handed in her dealings (Freia and Chorus: "Bow Down to the Stars"). Thoax and Farge are eager to stake their claim to this purported treasure world (Thoax and Farge: "The Vaults of Imyusoph"), and are horrified when Freia reveals herself at a banquet in a great temple (Freia, Thoax, and Farge: "Here Stands a Ghost"). Freia orders the Imyi to bind the Neimoidians, but the Imyi turn on all the outworlders even as the Neimoidians summon a band of Gran and Dug thugs they've brought for protection—and Sival Brentioch (told by Banu that Freia is alive) arrives with a fleet from Brentaal.

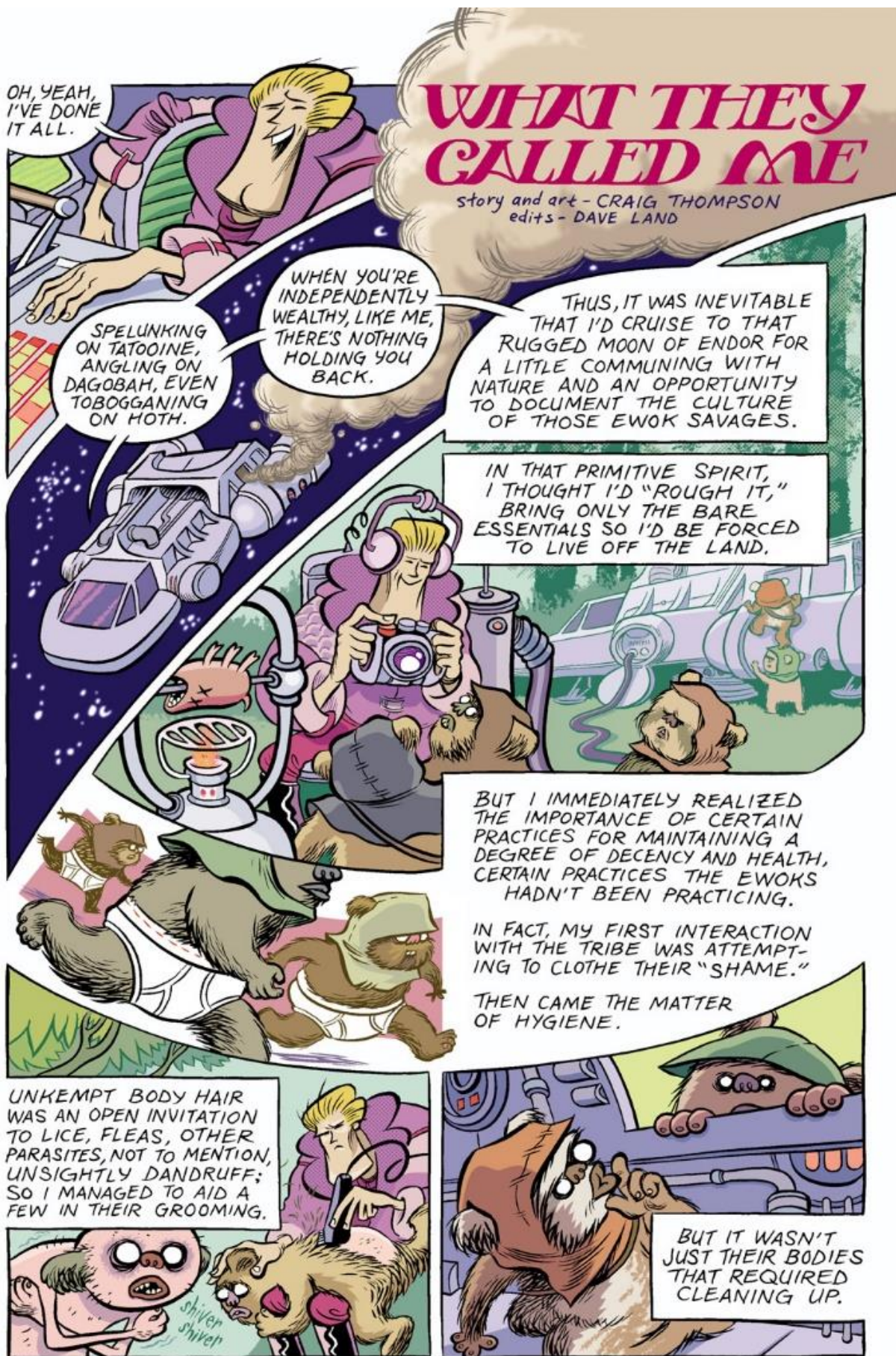
In the battle that follows, Banu saves Freia but is mortally wounded. As he lies dying in the burning temple, Sival reveals his true identity and his role as Freia's benefactor (Banu, Freia, and Sival: "Go Now"). Thoax and Farge are arrested, and Freia and Sival return to Brentaal to bury Banu, whose name will grace Freia's great trade route (Freia: "The Hydian Way"), and to marry (All: "The Center of the Galaxy [Reprise]").

Historic Notes. As expected for an opera composed twenty-two hundred years after the events it describes, The Kallea Cycle takes some liberties with Kallea's story. Despite the great popularity of the name he assumed, there's no evidence that Sival Brentioch ever hid his identity or his role as an underwriter while courting Kallea. Recent scholarship by Imperial archivists, meanwhile, suggests Banu Hydian's role in the story has been exaggerated. Freia Kallea knit together several preexisting routes in blazing the eastern half of the Hydian

Way, and the Brentaal–Denon Route was eons old during her time. The Cycle is remarkably accurate in recording the navigational obstacles she overcame, however, and Kallea's accomplishments in the western half of the galaxy continue to inspire awe in scouts. It should be noted that stellar drift and changing economics have caused many parts of the Hydian Way to shift slightly since Kallea's time.

Addendum. Much as been made by irresponsible media outlets of the decision that Banu Hydian's role—traditionally sung by a Duros double-bass vocalist—will be sung by Chandrila's Amaro Fonteen. Neither the Brentaal Council on High Human Culture nor the Brentaal Hall Conservatory countenance the narrow-minded idea that a Duros role cannot be voiced by a human. The council and conservatory also reject out of hand the idea that certain arias in the Cycle should be considered somehow offensive in their portrayals of nonhumans and their philosophies. The Cycle is one of the highest achievements of Brentaal and Core culture, and as such speaks for itself.

This addendum was prepared with the assistance of the Arts Division of the Commission for the Preservation of the New Order's Coalition for Progress.



THEIR PAGAN RITUALS AND BELIEFS WERE TOO CREEPY--CERTAIN TO FRIGHTEN A CONSERVATIVE TOURIST MARKET.



AND THAT ABSURD TREE WORSHIP ONLY DISCOURAGED THE MOON'S POTENTIAL FOR A FLOURISHING LOGGING TRADE.



I HELPED CLEAR AWAY THE CLUTTER OF A SPOOKY, OLD WORLD RELIGION TO MAKE SPACE FOR A MODERN AND SANITARY FAITH.



AND LET ME TELL YOU, THOSE ISOLATED CREATURES WERE LIKE MOTHS --HUNGRY FOR THE LIGHT OF A NEW AGE.



--HUNGRY FOR THE TREASURES OUR CULTURE HAD TO OFFER.



AMIDST ALL THE HARD WORK I WAS UNDERTAKING IN THE NAME OF CULTURAL RELATIONS, I STILL FOUND TIME TO SIGHT-SEE ABOUT ENDOR.



-- TO BEHOLD THE WONDER AND MAJESTY OF ITS VIRGIN FORESTLAND.

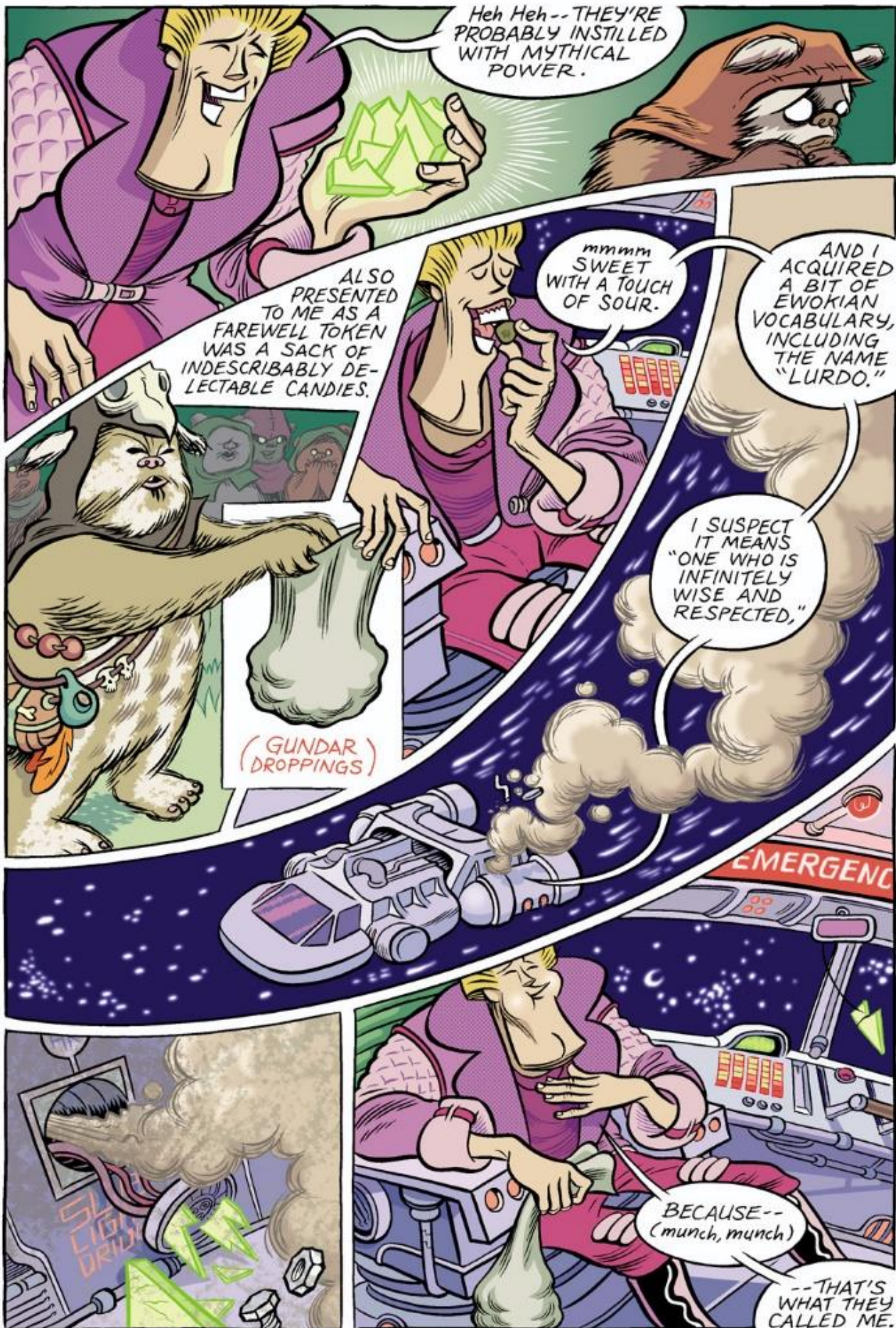
BEAUTIFUL!

to ssa

WHEN I'D SEEN ALL THERE WAS TO SEE (BELIEVE IT OR NOT, I CRAMMED IT ALL IN TEN DAYS), I FIRED UP MY STARSHIP TO RETURN TO THE HEAVENS, BUT NOT BEFORE SALVAGING A FEW ARTIFACTS.

THESE CRYSTALS, DELIVERED TO ME BY A PARTICULARLY SOLEMN SCOUT, WERE, NO DOUBT, PART OF A RITUAL TO MOURN MY DEPARTURE.





Ewoks: Wicket Goes Fishing

It was spring in the Ewok village. As the first rays of morning sun filtered through the trees, Wicket bounced out of his hammock. He had the whole day planned—he was going down to the river to try out his new fishing rod for the first time!

“I’ll bet I catch more trout than ever today!” he said, and hurried outside to get ready.

Wicket saddled his pet bordok, Baga, packed a big lunch, and strapped his bait and rod to the saddle. “It’s just you, me, and the trout today!” he said happily, giving the bordok a little pat. “No Woklings to worry about!” Wicket was really looking forward to spending a day alone in the forest. He was tired of the hustle and bustle of the village, and he was especially tired of Woklings. They always tagged along after him and got in the way. He’d had enough of baby-sitting, too.

Just then Wicket’s mother and baby sister, Winda, walked by. “Where are you going, Wicket?” asked his mother.

“I’m going to try out my new fishing rod,” said Wicket.

“Why don’t you take Winda along?” suggested his mother. “She’d love to go with you.”

Wicket groaned. A Wokling—his own baby sister—on his fishing trip? She’d ruin his day for sure! “But, Mama—” Wicket began.

A stern look from his mother told him there was no point in arguing.

“All right, she can come,” said Wicket gloomily. “But she’d better be good.”

Winda beamed happily and scampered along after her big brother.

“You’re too little to walk to the river, Winda,” said Wicket. “You’ll have to ride Baga.” He lifted her into the saddle. “Don’t touch *anything*! Understand?”

Winda smiled sweetly and nodded her head.

Wicket scowled as he took the reins and led Baga out of the village. He hadn’t planned on walking all the way to the river. And he certainly hadn’t planned on taking care of Winda!

The forest was cool and smelled of pine and honeysuckle. As Wicket walked along the path, he thought about the river. It must be teeming with trout. "I sure hope the fish are biting today!" he said.

Just then Winda began to giggle.

"What's so funny, Winda?" called Wicket.

Winda laughed and pointed to the path behind her. A trail of worms was wriggling into the woods. They were coming from Wicket's bait basket!

"My bait!" cried Wicket. "How could you let them get away?"

"You said, 'Don't touch anything!'" said Winda. "So I didn't."

Wicket scowled. "I guess I can catch some more when we get to the river," he said.

Wicket kept walking, and before long he noticed that Winda was being awfully quiet—too quiet! When he looked back, he saw that she was fast asleep, with her head resting on Baga's saddle. "She can't cause trouble while she's sleeping," he thought happily.

Soon they came to a small clearing. "This looks like a good place for a picnic," said Wicket. But when he opened his saddlebags, he found they were empty. Wicket searched frantically through each one for the food he had packed. Fruit, nuts, sandwiches, and juice—everything was gone! Winda had eaten every last mouthful!

"I guess I can eat fish for lunch," he said with a sigh.

Wicket tried to keep his eye on Winda when she woke up from her nap. But then the trail narrowed and he moved ahead to clear the brush from their path. When he returned, he found Winda twirling his new fishing rod around like a baton. "*Put that down!*" he shouted.

Winda let go, and the rod came crashing down. It hit a rock and then fell into a clump of bushes.

Wicket chased after it. He shoved aside the bushes to find the rod in pieces on the ground.

"Bad Wicket!" giggled Winda. "Mama said never to play in poison ivy!"

Wicket looked around him and suddenly began to itch! "That does it!" he shouted angrily. "I've had it with you, Winda. First you let all my bait loose, then you eat my lunch! Now you've broken my brand-new fishing rod, and on top of that I've got poison ivy! I'm sick and tired of this! We're going home!"

Soon they arrived back at their hut.

“*Wahhh!*” cried Winda, running into her mother’s arms. Wicket stomped in behind her and sat by the fireplace. Their mother listened to the whole story and shook her head.

“There, there, Winda,” she said. “Wicket didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. Did you, Wicket?”

“And I suppose she didn’t mean to break my new fishing rod, or eat my lunch, or lose my bait, or *ruin my day?*” he cried.

“That’s enough, Wicket,” said his mother. “Go over to Logray’s hut and see if he has a powder for that rash.”

Wicket stomped out the door.

Logray was the old medicine man, and Wicket loved to visit him.

“I have just the potion for your poison ivy,” said Logray. “It will only take a few minutes to prepare.”

While the medicine man worked, Wicket told Logray about his terrible day with Winda and how fed up he was with Woklings.

“They follow me everywhere, they get in the way, and they’re always breaking things,” he wailed.

Logray stopped for a moment and then added an extra ingredient to the powder. He poured the powder into a cup of tea and offered it to Wicket. “This is just what you need!” he said.

Suddenly Wicket’s itching was gone.

In its place was a warm, drowsy feeling.

As Wicket fell into a deep sleep, he thought he heard Logray’s voice saying, “Dream, Wicket . . . of lessons learned and forgotten!”

Wicket dreamed of a time long, long ago when he was still a Wokling. He was the youngest in the family. Winda hadn’t even been born yet!

It was a misty spring morning. Wicket’s big brother Weechee had just gotten a brand-new bow and arrows and was going into the forest for target practice.

Weechee put his bow and arrows into a pouch and strapped them to the saddle of a big, shaggy bordok.

“I’ll lead the bordok for you!” offered little Wicket eagerly.

“All right, but be careful!” said Weechee, and they set off into the forest.

Wicket followed his brother up a steep, rocky trail that ran alongside a deep ravine. As the bordok slowly picked his way along the trail, Wicket fell farther and farther behind Weechee.

"Hurry up, you pokey old bordok," Wicket ordered, giving the reins a sharp tug. The bordok stumbled, and as it did Weechee's new arrows slipped out of the pouch and went clattering to the bottom of the ravine!

"Wicket!" shouted Weechee. "I told you to be careful!"

"I know," said Wicket sheepishly. "I'm sorry."

Weechee looked down into the ravine. "I'll never be able to climb down there," he said. "All my arrows are gone—for good!"

"Look, Weechee!" cried Wicket. "You can still use the bow as a slingshot!" He demonstrated by grabbing a rock, setting it against the string, and pulling back. But he pulled too hard. *Ploing!* The string snapped in two!

"I've had enough of you for one day!" cried Weechee angrily. "Go home and leave me alone! You've ruined everything!"

Hurt and confused, little Wicket ran to his Soul Tree. He sat under it all day, thinking about Weechee and the bow and arrows. "I only wanted to help," he sniffled. "It's hard being a Wokling—nobody wants you around, and you're never old enough to do anything by yourself!"

"If I ever have a kid brother or sister, I'll never, ever be mean to them!" he decided.

Suddenly Wicket opened his eyes and looked around. He was in Logray's hut, holding a cup of tea. "I must have fallen asleep . . . I had such a strange dream!"

"Yes?" said Logray with a smile.

"I've got to find Winda!" cried Wicket, leaping out of his seat. He thanked Logray for the healing powder and rushed out the door.

Wicket ran all the way home. Winda was sitting by her mother, having dinner.

"I'm really sorry, Winda," said Wicket. "I wasn't very nice to you today." Winda's face brightened.

"I didn't mean all those things I said to you—I just forgot how hard it is to be the youngest in the family!"

Winda threw her little arms around her big brother and gave him a hug.

Late that night, when everyone had gone to bed, Wicket tiptoed over to Winda's hammock. "Are you still awake, Winda?" whispered Wicket.

"Uh-huh," she mumbled sleepily.

"How would you like to go fishing with me tomorrow?" asked Wicket.

The Ewok Who Was Afraid

On the forest moon of Endor, the Ewoks hold a special celebration once a year. The final and most exciting event is a raft race along the rapids in the underground caves.

Willy's big brother, Weechee, was going to compete. Of all the young Ewoks, Weechee was one of the best rafters.

"Can I come with you, Weechee?" asked Willy as the young Ewoks gathered for the race.

"There isn't any room for you," said Weechee. He turned to the others. "Hey, have you seen my partner, Paploo?"



“Paploo’s not coming!” Teebo shouted to Weechee. “He hurt his leg in the bordok relay and had to go home.”

“Oh, no!” said Weechee. “Where am I going to find another partner at the last minute?”

“I’ll be your partner!” said Willy.

“You? You’d just mess up like you always do,” said Weechee.

“No, I won’t, Weechee. I promise! Please let me come,” begged Willy.



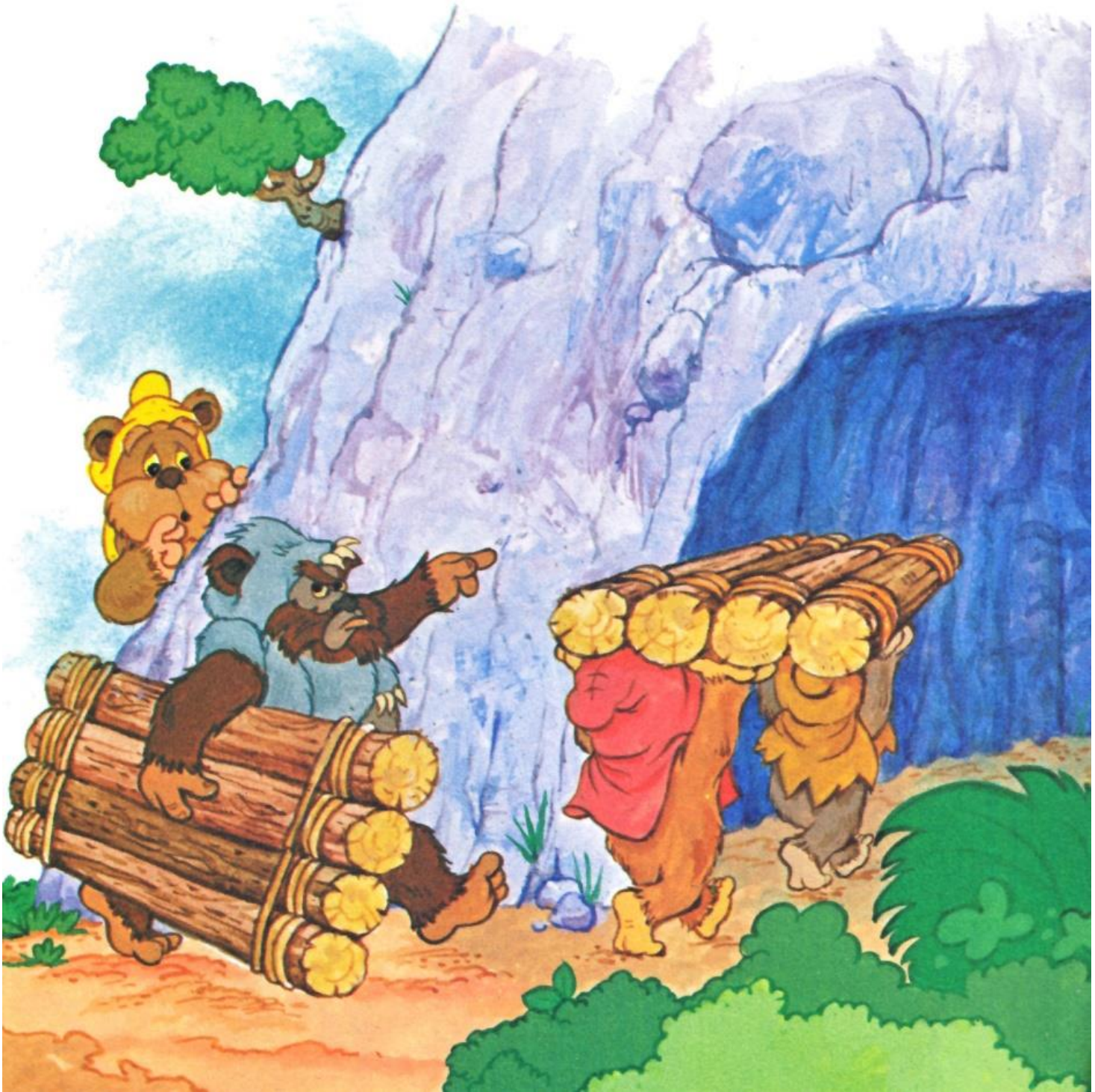


“The caves aren’t for cowards,” said Weechee. “It’s dark down there and it’ll be almost nighttime when we finish. You’ll start crying and spoil everything.”

“I’m not a coward,” protested Willy. “Come on, Weechee! Just give me a chance!”

Two by two the young Ewoks were entering the caves, carrying their rafts. Weechee knew it would be hard to paddle the underground rapids alone. "All right, Willy!" he snapped. "But you'd better do everything I tell you. Now hurry up! We're already the last team to start."

But as he neared the mouth of the cave, Willy stopped. The long tunnel ahead looked black. Willy's legs began to shake.



"Come on!" called Weechee.

Suddenly Willy remembered the stories his father, Deej, had told, about the tunnels that twisted through the shadows beneath the forest, about the sound of the rapids, and about the mysterious cave spirits.

"W-W-W-eechee," Willy called. "Wh-wh-what about the cave s-s-spirits?"

"Huh?" Weechee answered impatiently. "Cave spirits come at night. Hurry up!"

Willy's eyes filled with tears. "I'm sorry, Weechee," he whimpered. "I'm too scared."

Weechee was furious. "You're hopeless!" he shouted, and stalked into the cave.





Willy began to cry.

"Weechee is right," he sobbed. "I am hopeless." He wandered sadly away, through the grove of star leaf trees which led down to Mirror Lake.

"O Great Spirit Tree," he cried. "If only I could be brave like the other Ewoks."

Willy almost couldn't believe what happened next. The air grew still. The grove of star leaf trees began to glow. And right in front of him, gleaming in a ray of sparkling light, he saw a bright blue stone. It looked just like the magic stones he had seen Logray, the medicine man, give to grown Ewok warriors.



“Bee cha wa wa!” exclaimed the little Ewok. He picked up the stone and held it up to the sky. The Endor sun shimmered through it. Sure enough! It *was* a magic stone!

“Keep this stone with you,” Willy remembered Logray saying to each warrior. “It will make you brave, and no evil will have power over you.”

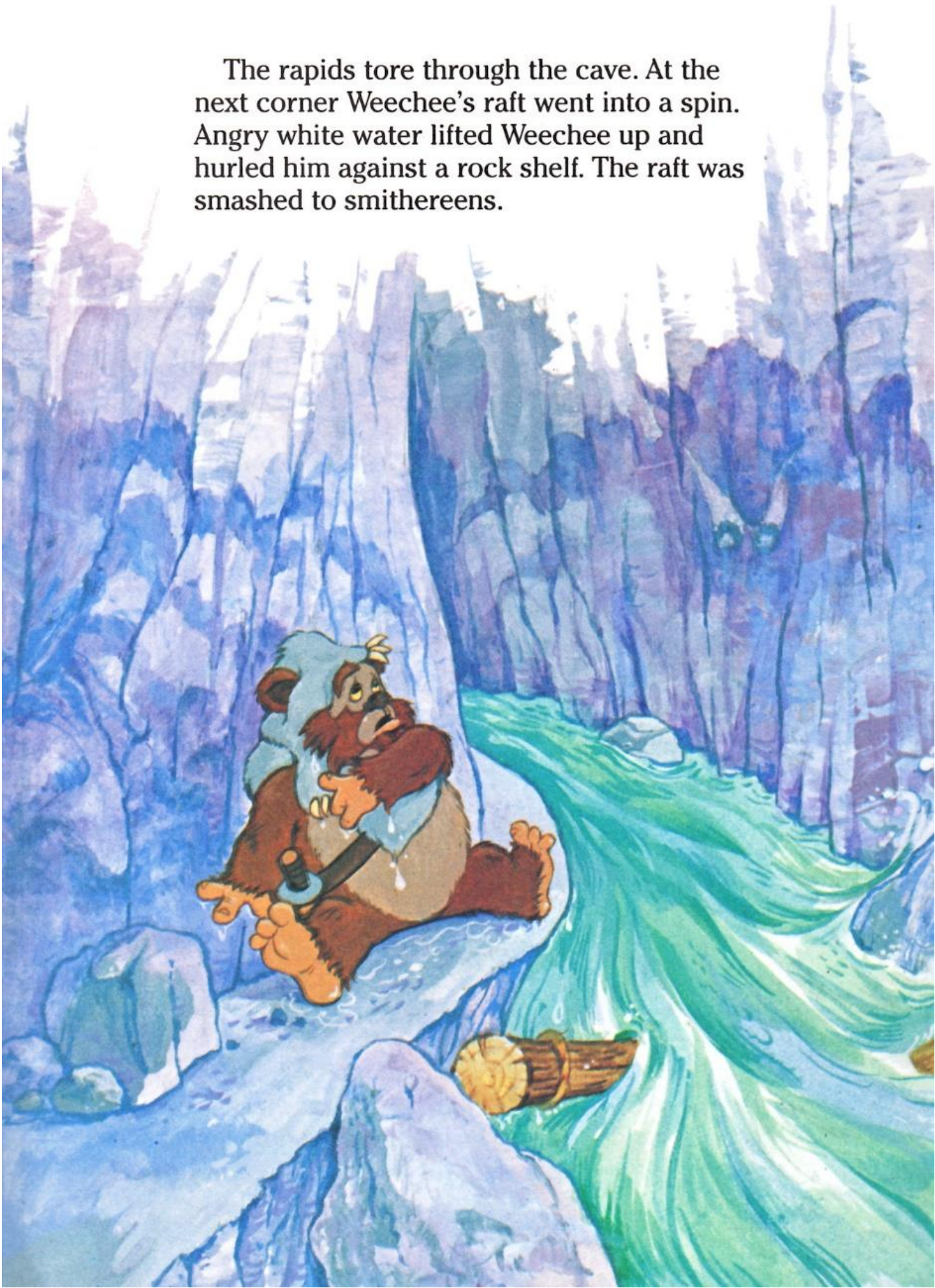
Willy wiped away his tears. “Wait till I tell Weechee that from now on I’ll be brave!” he said. Then he tucked the magic stone into his arrowgrass pouch and skipped down to the lake to wait for Weechee.

"I knew I couldn't depend on Willy!" thought Weechee as he launched his raft. The other Ewoks were already up ahead, paddling into the channels. Weechee had never rafted alone. Without Willy he'd have to manage both the right and left sides of the raft himself. "But I'll win anyway," he thought with his usual confidence.

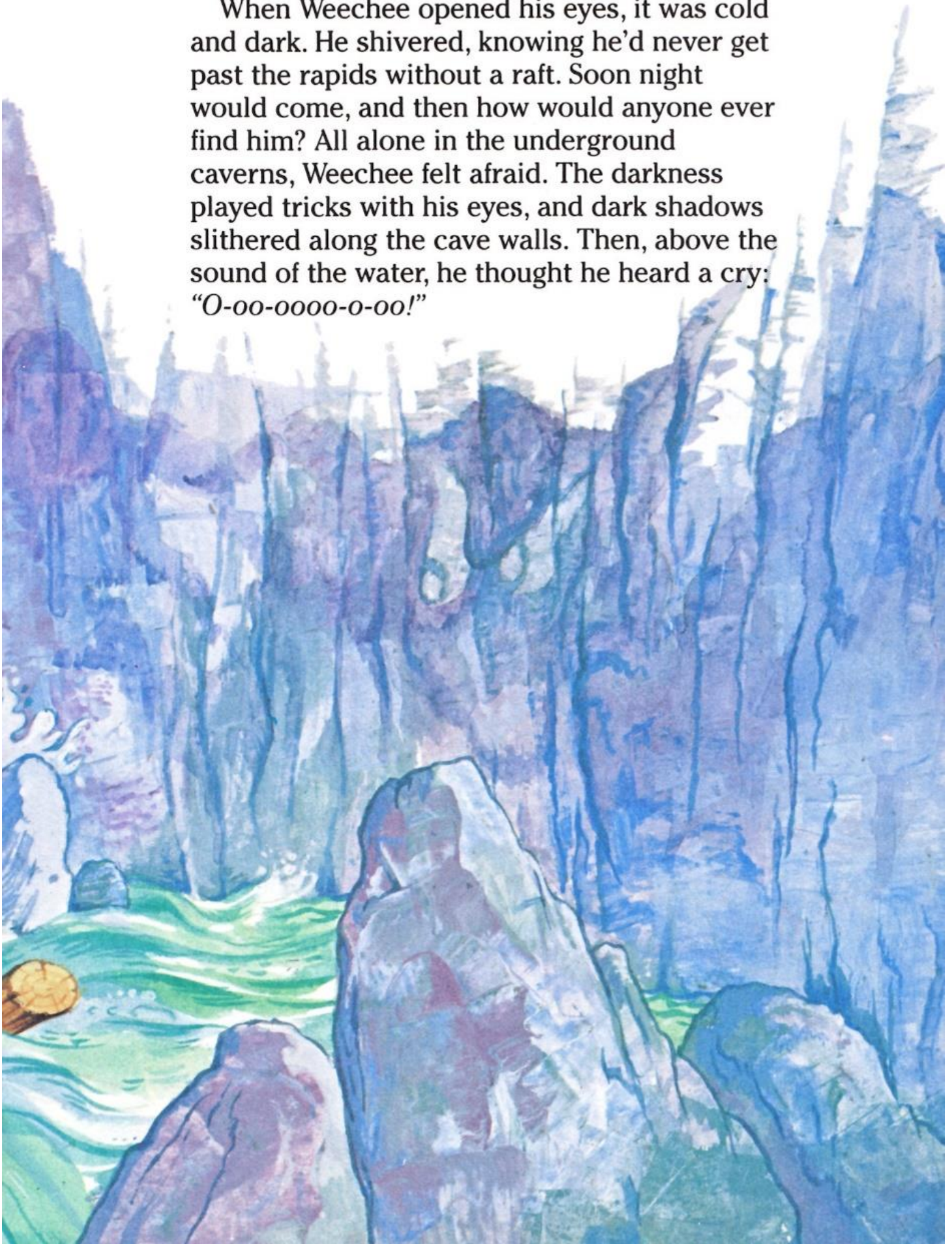
At first the raft moved slowly, but soon the currents grew stronger. Then the raft began to gain speed. In another minute the water was racing and Weechee was in the rapids. Faster and faster rushed the water. Weechee fought to keep control of the raft. Suddenly he whipped around a turn and the paddle flew out of his hands.



The rapids tore through the cave. At the next corner Weechee's raft went into a spin. Angry white water lifted Weechee up and hurled him against a rock shelf. The raft was smashed to smithereens.



When Weechee opened his eyes, it was cold and dark. He shivered, knowing he'd never get past the rapids without a raft. Soon night would come, and then how would anyone ever find him? All alone in the underground caverns, Weechee felt afraid. The darkness played tricks with his eyes, and dark shadows slithered along the cave walls. Then, above the sound of the water, he thought he heard a cry: "O-oo-oooo-o-oo!"





“Wh-who’s there?” Weechee said in a trembling voice.

“Oooo-o-o-o-oo!” came the sound again.

“It must be the wind,” thought Weechee. “But maybe it’s a cave spirit!”

Now Weechee’s teeth began to chatter. He had never been so afraid in his life. “If I ever get out of this cave I’ll never tease Willy about being afraid again!” he whispered.

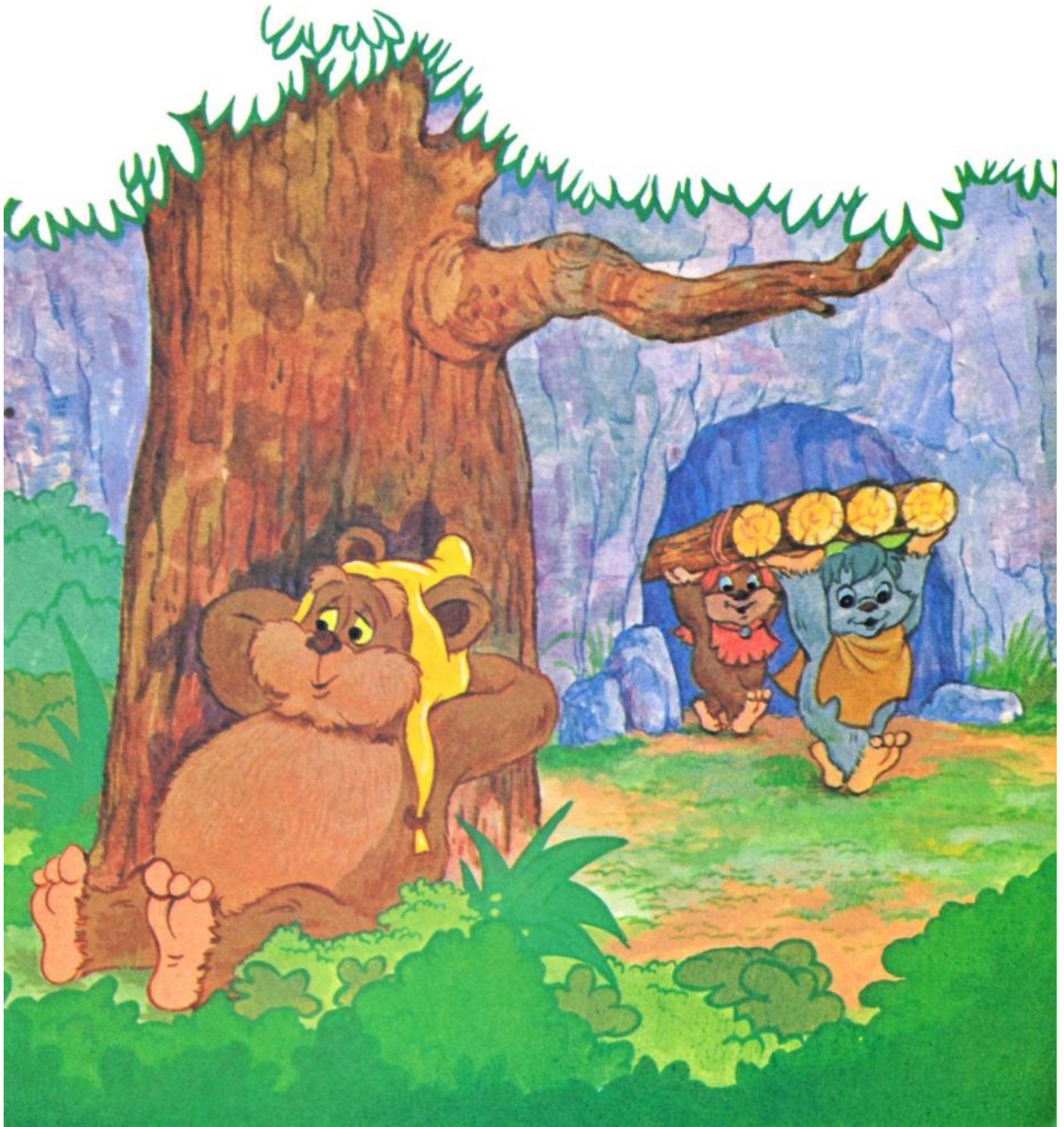
“Ooo-ooo-o-o-o!” went the sound again.

“Help!” cried Weechee. “Help!”

Meanwhile, Willy had reached the lakeside and sat down next to a rippleberry tree. He could already hear the happy voices of the young Ewoks as they emerged from the caves.

“We won!” called the first team out.

“Second!” cried the next.



"Third!" One by one the rafts spilled out into the light. Willy hid in the shadow of the tree. He felt ashamed of himself. He looked anxiously for his brother. "Poor Weechee will be last," he thought.

Then Willy heard someone say, "Where's Weechee?"

"I think I saw him pass us," another Ewok answered.

"I'm sure my raft was the last one out of the cave," said Teebo. "There was no one behind me."

"Hurry up!" someone shouted. "The night will soon be here."





Team by team, the young Ewoks headed back to the forest. But Willy still saw no sign of Weechee. Forest shadows lengthened as the Endor sun sank toward the horizon.



“The terrible Night Spirit will be here soon!” thought Willy. His heart pounded in his chest. His brother hadn’t come out of the cave at all!

“Hey!” Willy called to the others. But they had disappeared down the path toward home and didn’t hear him.

Behind him the deepening shadows looked sinister. Willy began to tremble. Suddenly he remembered the magic stone. He took it out and held it for a moment next to his heart. Then he took the biggest breath he could and stepped into the shadows of the forest.

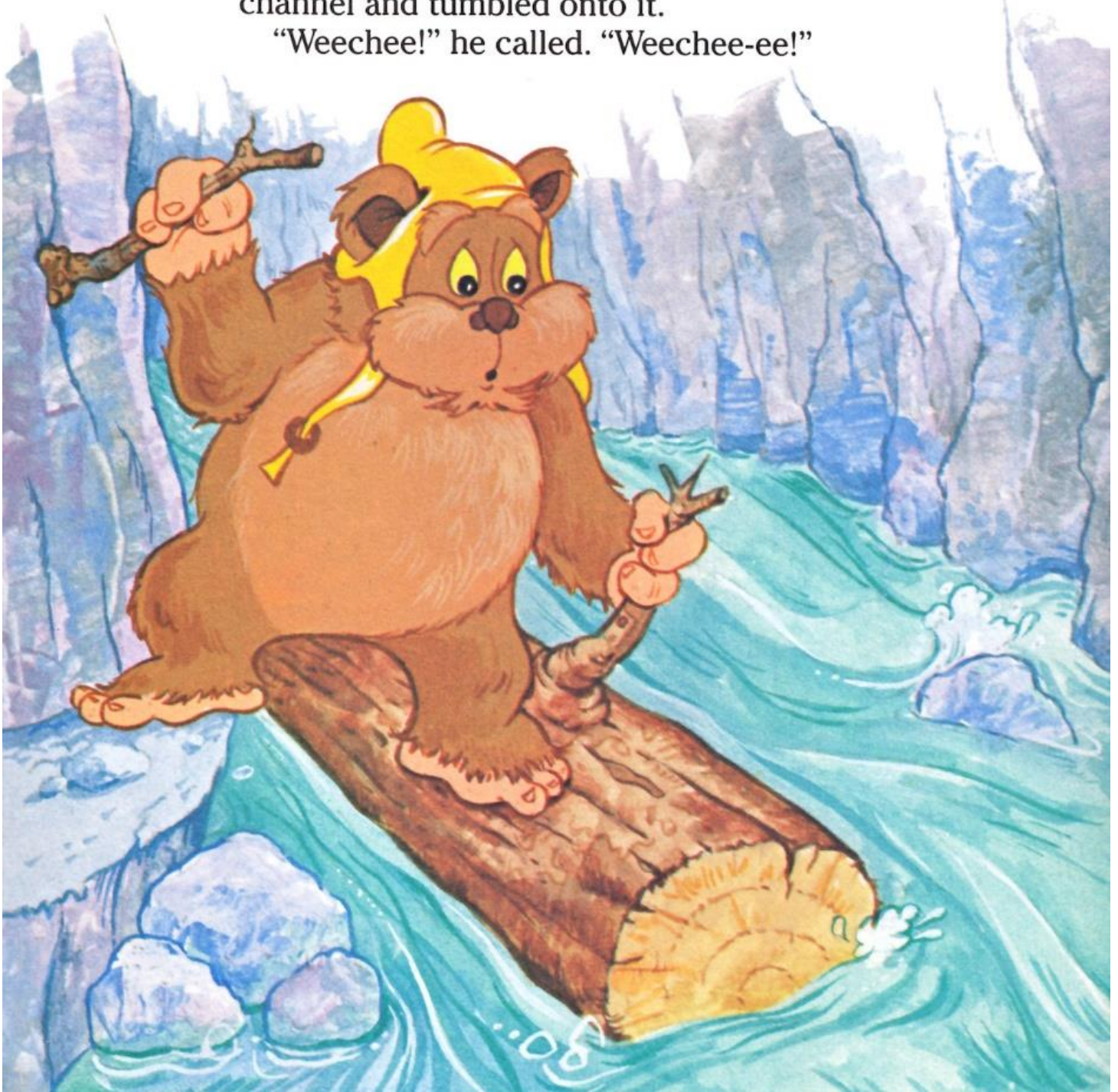
Branches grabbed at Willy as he hurried through the dark, back to the entrance of the cave.

It looked blacker than ever inside.

"The magic stone will keep me safe!" he thought.

Quickly he found a log and dragged it into the tunnel. He followed the sound of the lapping water. Then he rolled the log into the channel and tumbled onto it.

"Weechee!" he called. "Weechee-ee!"





The log moved slowly in the current and Willy wrapped his arms around it to keep it steady. "Hey, Weechee-e-e!" Willy shouted.

The wind whistled through the caves. "Oo-oooo!"

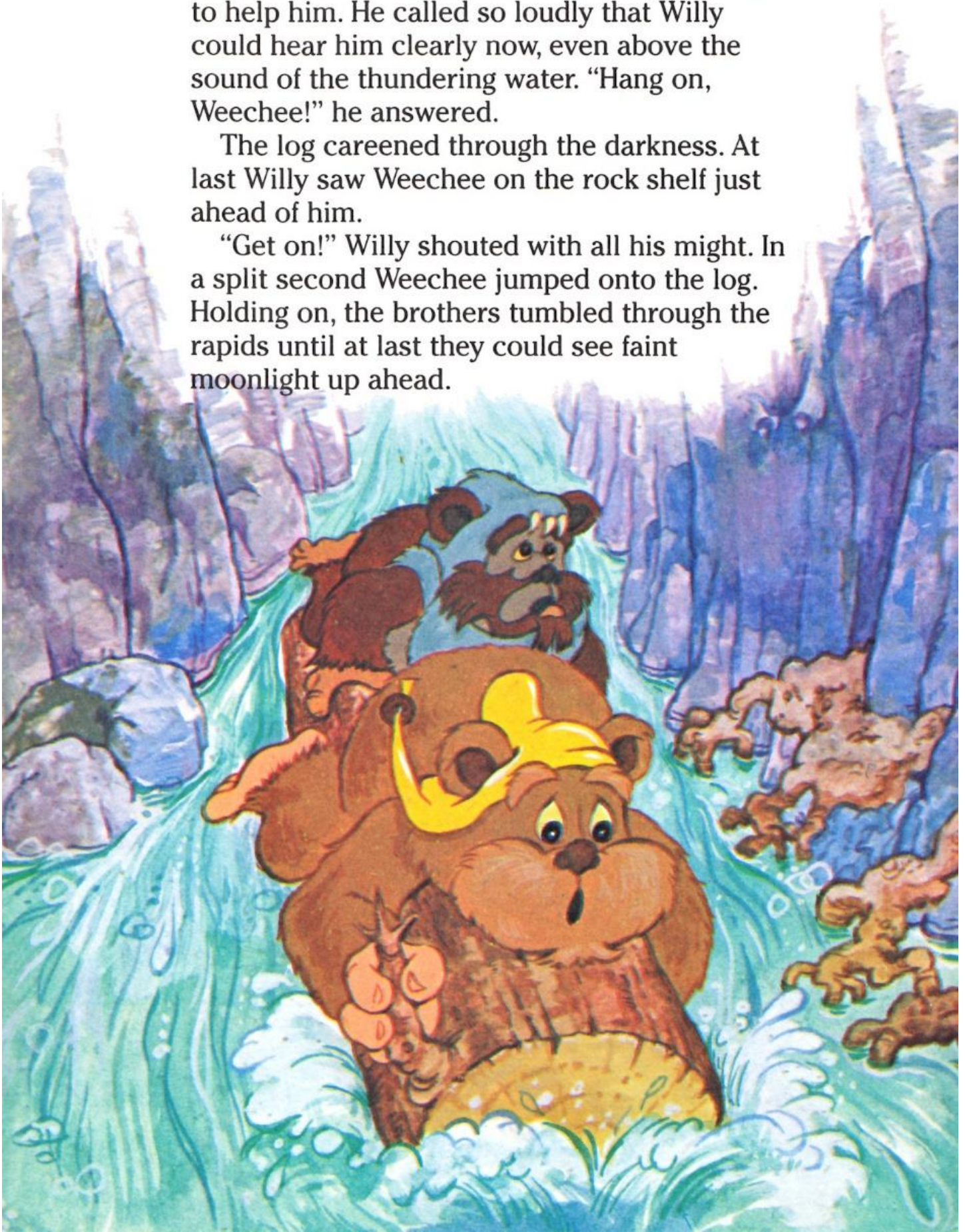
Then out of the deep darkness came a faint cry. "Help! Help!"

"Weechee!" Willy called loudly. "I'm coming!" The log moved along more quickly as the current pulled it toward the rapids. Faster moved the water. Faster moved the log.

Now Weechee knew that someone had come to help him. He called so loudly that Willy could hear him clearly now, even above the sound of the thundering water. "Hang on, Weechee!" he answered.

The log careened through the darkness. At last Willy saw Weechee on the rock shelf just ahead of him.

"Get on!" Willy shouted with all his might. In a split second Weechee jumped onto the log. Holding on, the brothers tumbled through the rapids until at last they could see faint moonlight up ahead.



Then they burst from the cave.

"Weechee! Willy! Thank the Great Spirit Tree, you're safe!"

There at the lakeside were Deej, Shodu, Chief Chirpa, and the warriors who, alarmed at Weechee and Willy's absence, had started to search for them. The young Ewoks were lifted out of the water and wrapped in blankets.

"I was scared down there in the dark, Willy," said Weechee. "I'll never make fun of you again."



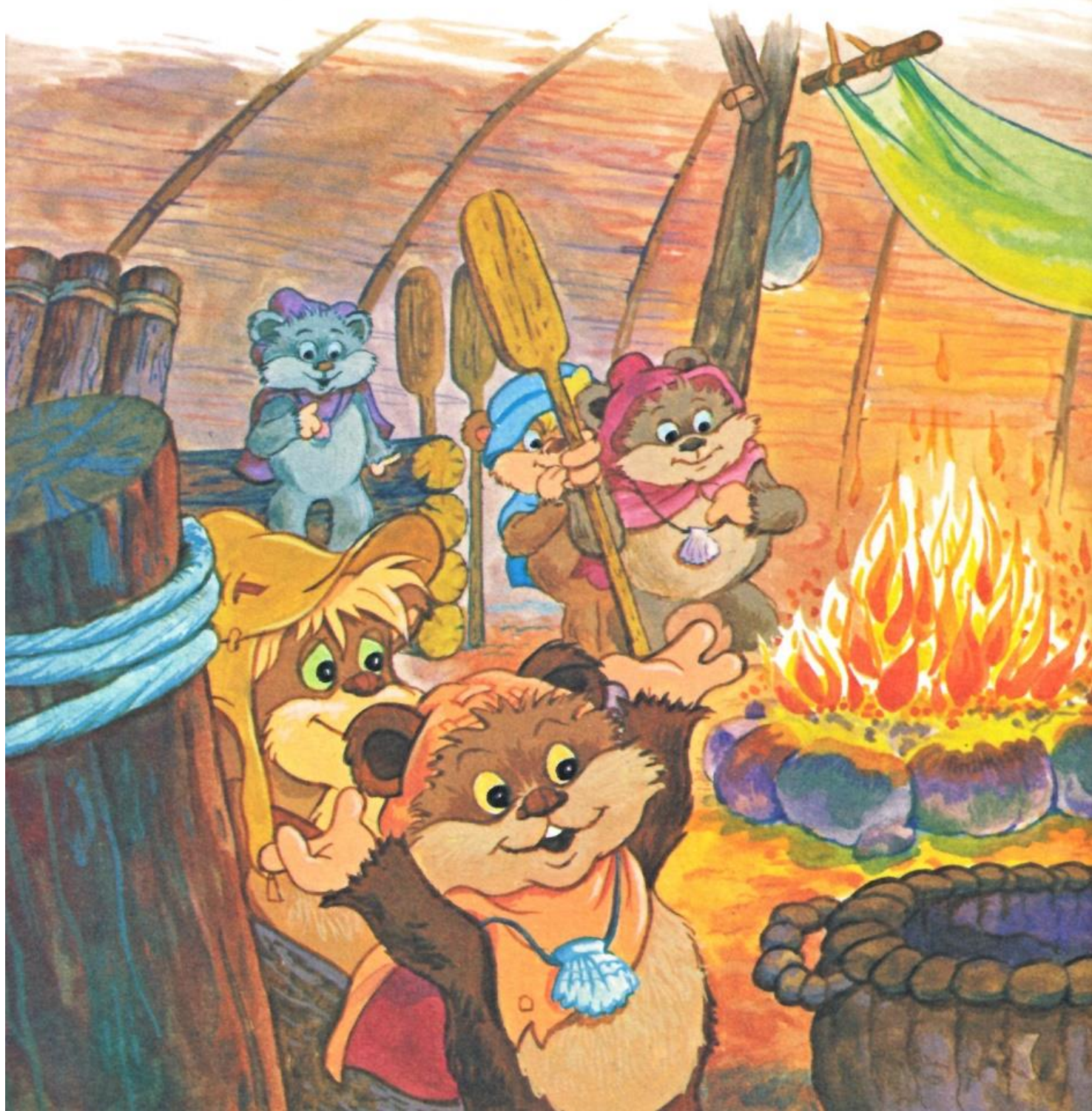


On the way back to the village Weechee told the other Ewoks how Willy had come to find him. Shodu stopped and put her arms around her son. "How brave you were to go back for your brother," she said to Willy.

"I found a magic stone, and it made me brave," Willy explained. He reached for his pouch. It was empty! The stone was gone, lost somewhere in the churning rapids. Willy's eyes grew round with wonder. He realized how brave he had really been after all.

Later that night, Chief Chirpa and the Ewoks assembled in the ceremonial hut. The young Ewok rafters stood in a row. Last in line stood Willy. In the center of the hut a fire burned, and next to it was a vine basket filled with sacred shells. All the grown-up Ewoks stood in a circle, watching silently.

Chief Chirpa decorated each young Ewok with a shell medallion. "You have all done well today," he said.



Then he came to Willy. One last shell remained in the basket. It was a fire shell, the mark of Ewok bravery. The chief picked it up and hung it around Willy's neck.

"We are proudest of you, young Willy," said Chief Chirpa. "What you can do once, you can do again and again. For courage is magic from within the heart."

Cheers burst from the Ewoks. Willy's face shone with pride. Far into the night, sounds of happy celebration warmed the forest.



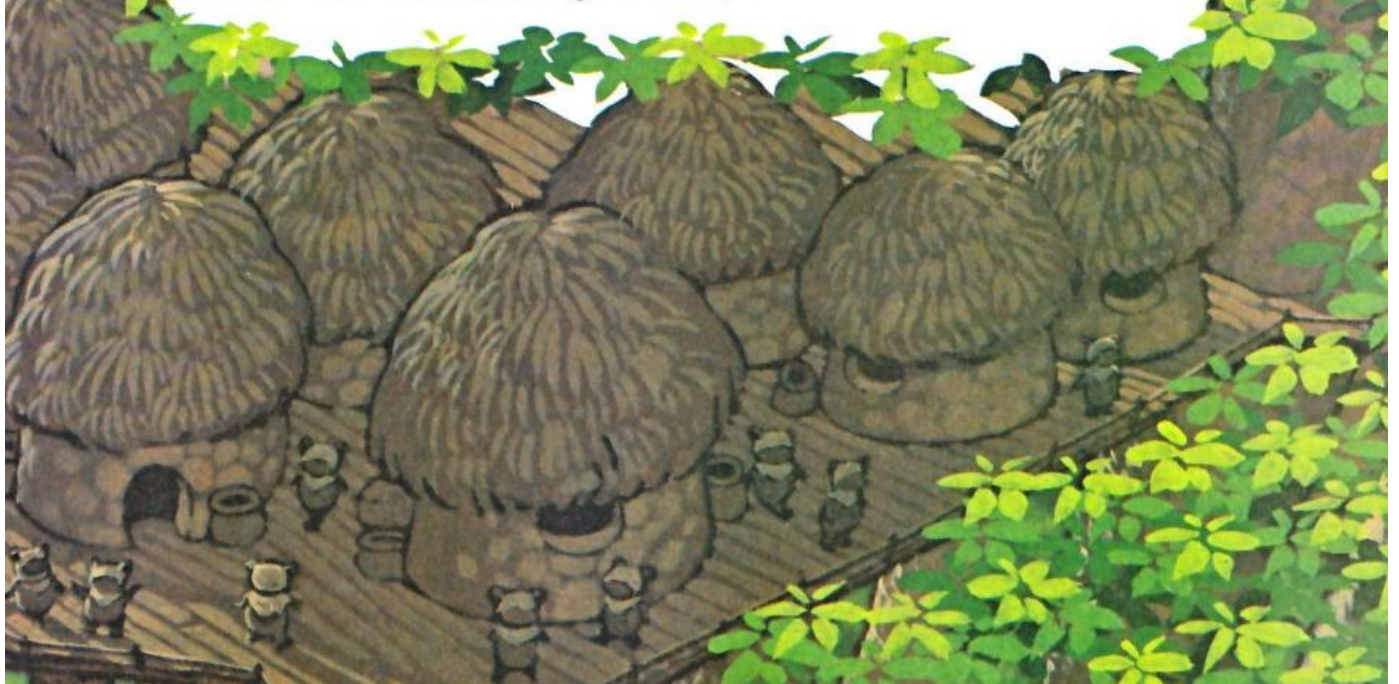
How The Ewoks Saved The Trees

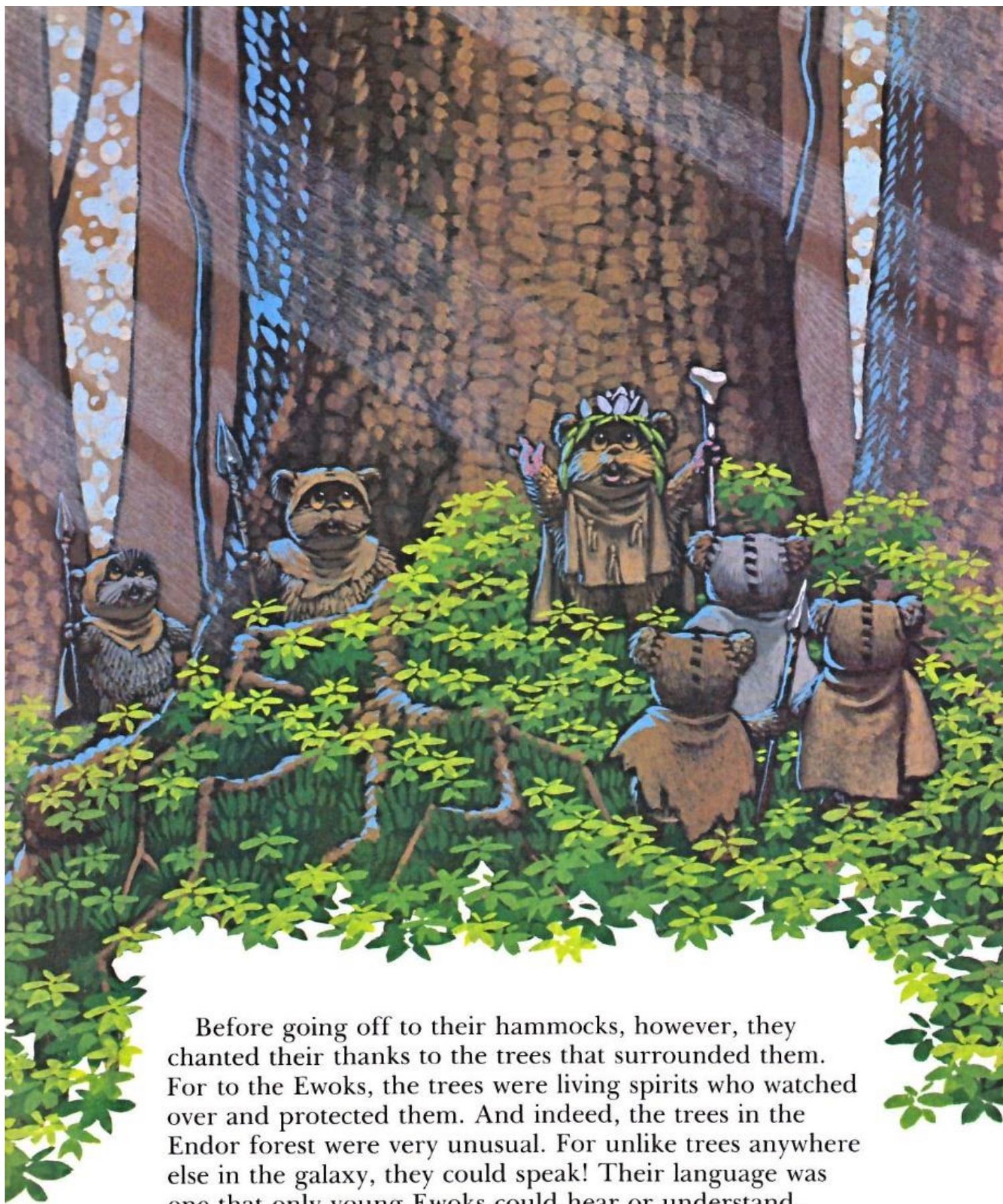
Once upon a time there was a tiny moon called Endor. It was so small in its galaxy of planets and stars that most space travelers whizzed right by without ever knowing it was there. Or if they chanced to notice it, they just continued on their way, not wanting to waste their time on such an unimportant puffball of a moon.

But had they cared to visit Endor, they would have discovered a moon alive with things both big and small. For despite its size, Endor boasted the tallest, most beautiful forest in all the galaxy. The trees were so high that their tops could barely be seen. And sometimes they couldn't be seen at all! Thick vines hung from the trees, and huge ferns, sweet-smelling pine needles, and wildflowers carpeted the forest floor.

Living in the great forest was a race of small, furry creatures called Ewoks. With bright, shiny eyes and black button noses, the Ewoks were as lovable in appearance as they were by nature. They were also very clever.

They lived in huts made of mud and sticks nestled in the high trees of the great forest. Here they busied themselves with many tasks: building homes, planting and harvesting their crops, teaching their children, and making tools and dishes and musical instruments from stone and bark and clay. Each night they gathered around the big bonfire in the center of the village, where they talked of the day's events, sang old Ewok songs, and danced until it grew very late and was time to go to sleep.





Before going off to their hammocks, however, they chanted their thanks to the trees that surrounded them. For to the Ewoks, the trees were living spirits who watched over and protected them. And indeed, the trees in the Endor forest were very unusual. For unlike trees anywhere else in the galaxy, they could speak! Their language was one that only young Ewoks could hear or understand, however. As the Ewoks grew older, the language became less clear, until, when they were fully grown, it was lost to them forever.

This is the story of two young Ewoks, Wicket and Princess Kneesaa, who once had a great adventure in the forest of tall trees. It started late one afternoon as they were gathering berries quite far from their village.

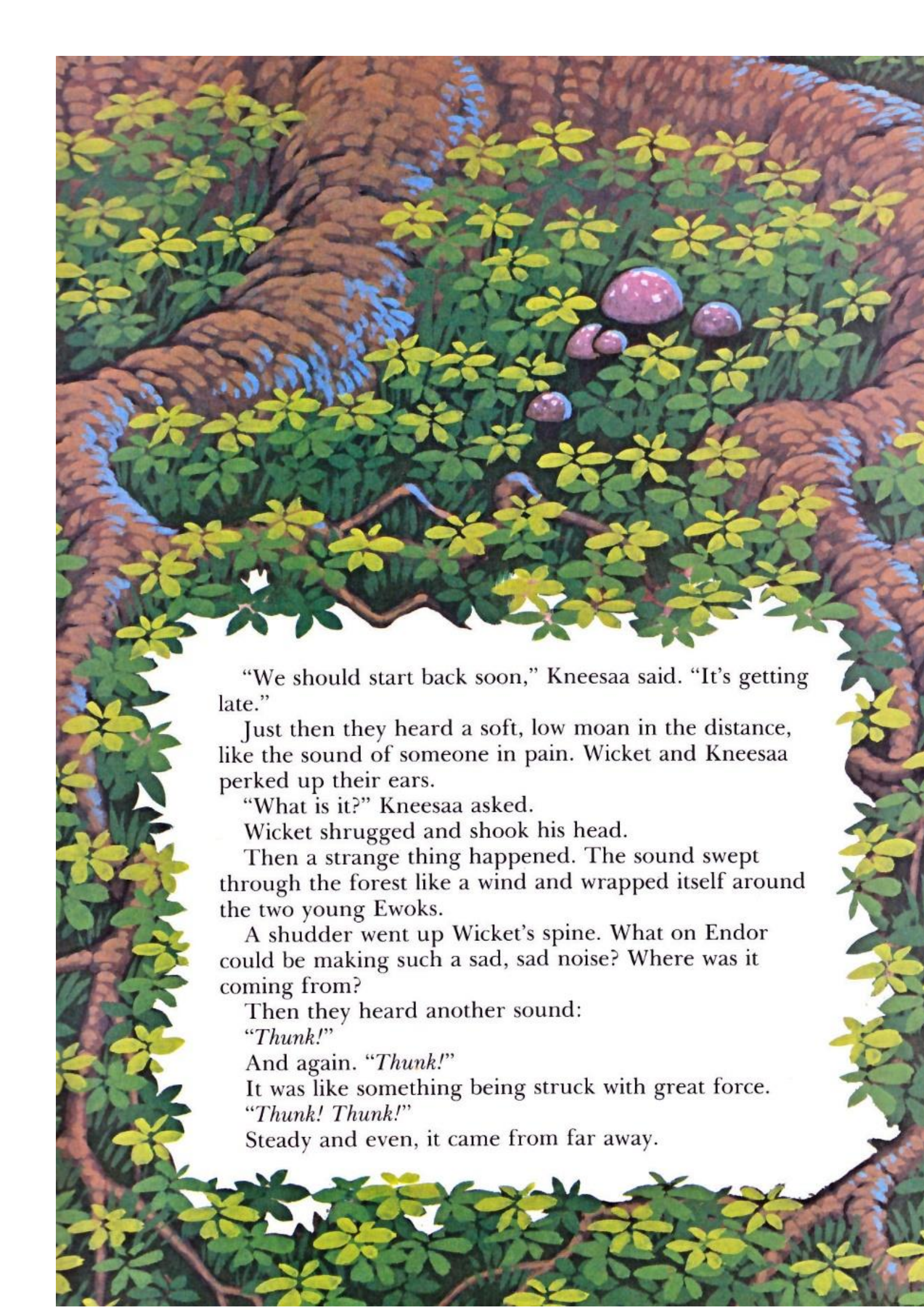
"Whew!" said Wicket, mopping his brow. "I've never picked so many berries. I don't think one or two would be missed, do you?"

Princess Kneesaa laughed as she watched her friend dig hungrily into his basket of juicy red fruit.

"If you eat them at that rate," she said, "you won't have any to take home."

Wicket laughed too. He knew Kneesaa was probably right. She usually was. In no time at all his face was covered with berry juice.



A vibrant illustration of a forest scene. In the center, a small stream flows through a dense thicket of green and yellow flowers. Several large, purple mushrooms with white spots are scattered among the foliage. The background shows more of the forest, with trees and more flowers. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and natural.

"We should start back soon," Kneesaa said. "It's getting late."

Just then they heard a soft, low moan in the distance, like the sound of someone in pain. Wicket and Kneesaa perked up their ears.

"What is it?" Kneesaa asked.

Wicket shrugged and shook his head.

Then a strange thing happened. The sound swept through the forest like a wind and wrapped itself around the two young Ewoks.

A shudder went up Wicket's spine. What on Endor could be making such a sad, sad noise? Where was it coming from?

Then they heard another sound:

"Thunk!"

And again. *"Thunk!"*

It was like something being struck with great force.

"Thunk! Thunk!"

Steady and even, it came from far away.

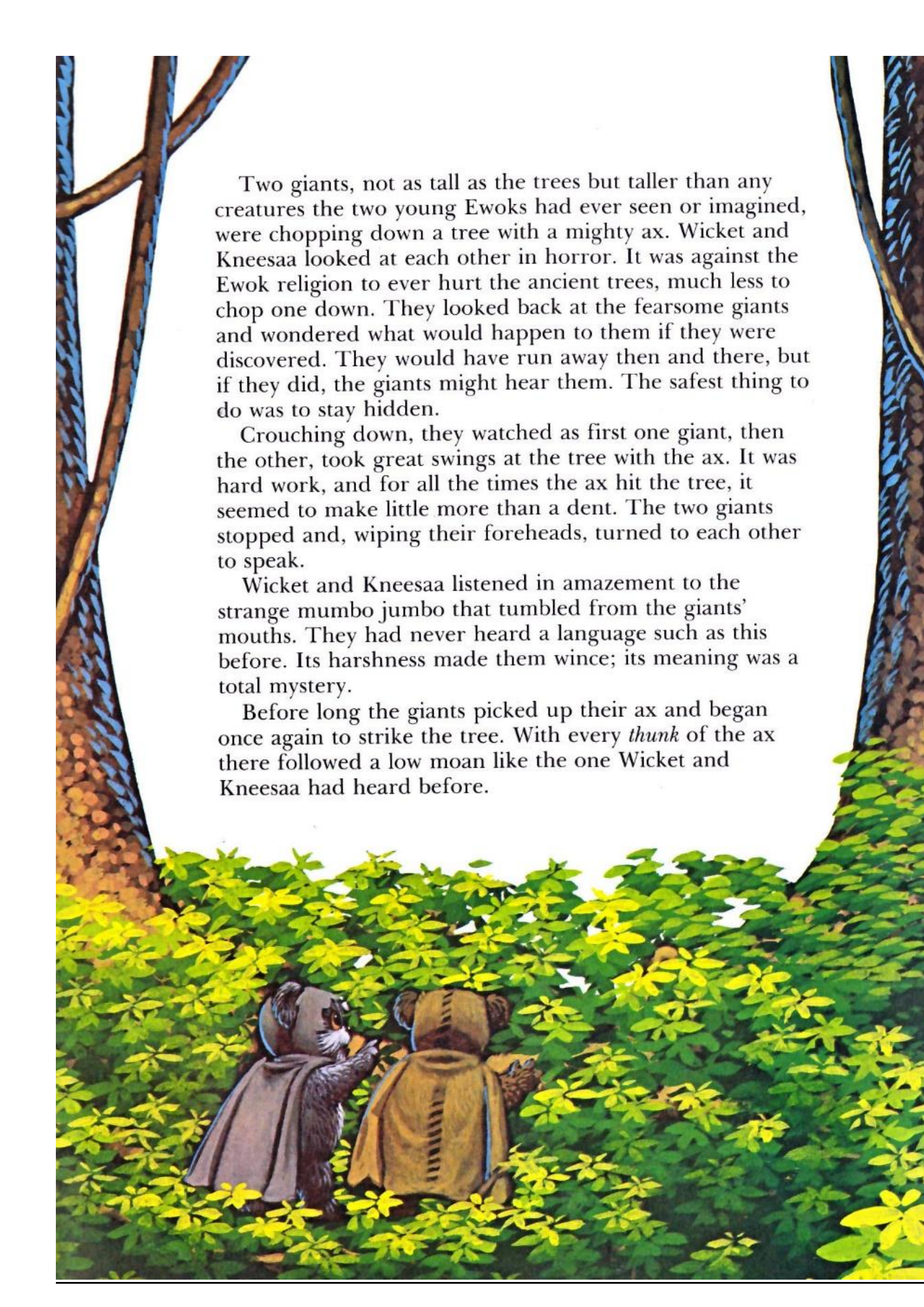


"Let's find out what it is," said Wicket, motioning to Princess Kneesaa to follow. Leaving their baskets, they crept quietly through the forest. The sound grew louder and louder with each step they took.

At last they came to a clearing.

"THUNK!"

The sound was very loud now. Wicket and Kneesaa pushed aside a cluster of leaves. What they saw made them gasp.



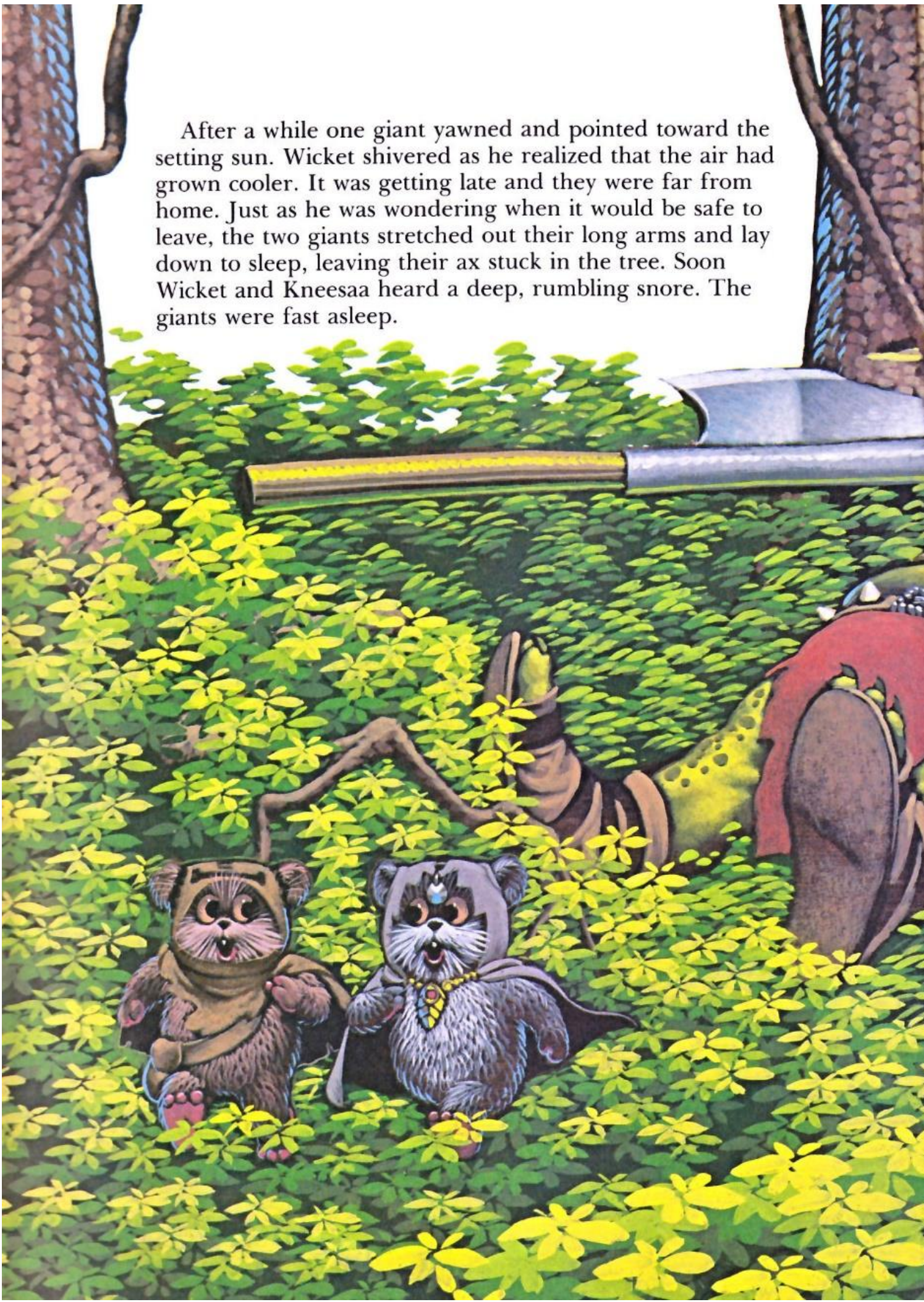
Two giants, not as tall as the trees but taller than any creatures the two young Ewoks had ever seen or imagined, were chopping down a tree with a mighty ax. Wicket and Kneesaa looked at each other in horror. It was against the Ewok religion to ever hurt the ancient trees, much less to chop one down. They looked back at the fearsome giants and wondered what would happen to them if they were discovered. They would have run away then and there, but if they did, the giants might hear them. The safest thing to do was to stay hidden.

Crouching down, they watched as first one giant, then the other, took great swings at the tree with the ax. It was hard work, and for all the times the ax hit the tree, it seemed to make little more than a dent. The two giants stopped and, wiping their foreheads, turned to each other to speak.

Wicket and Kneesaa listened in amazement to the strange mumbo jumbo that tumbled from the giants' mouths. They had never heard a language such as this before. Its harshness made them wince; its meaning was a total mystery.

Before long the giants picked up their ax and began once again to strike the tree. With every *thunk* of the ax there followed a low moan like the one Wicket and Kneesaa had heard before.

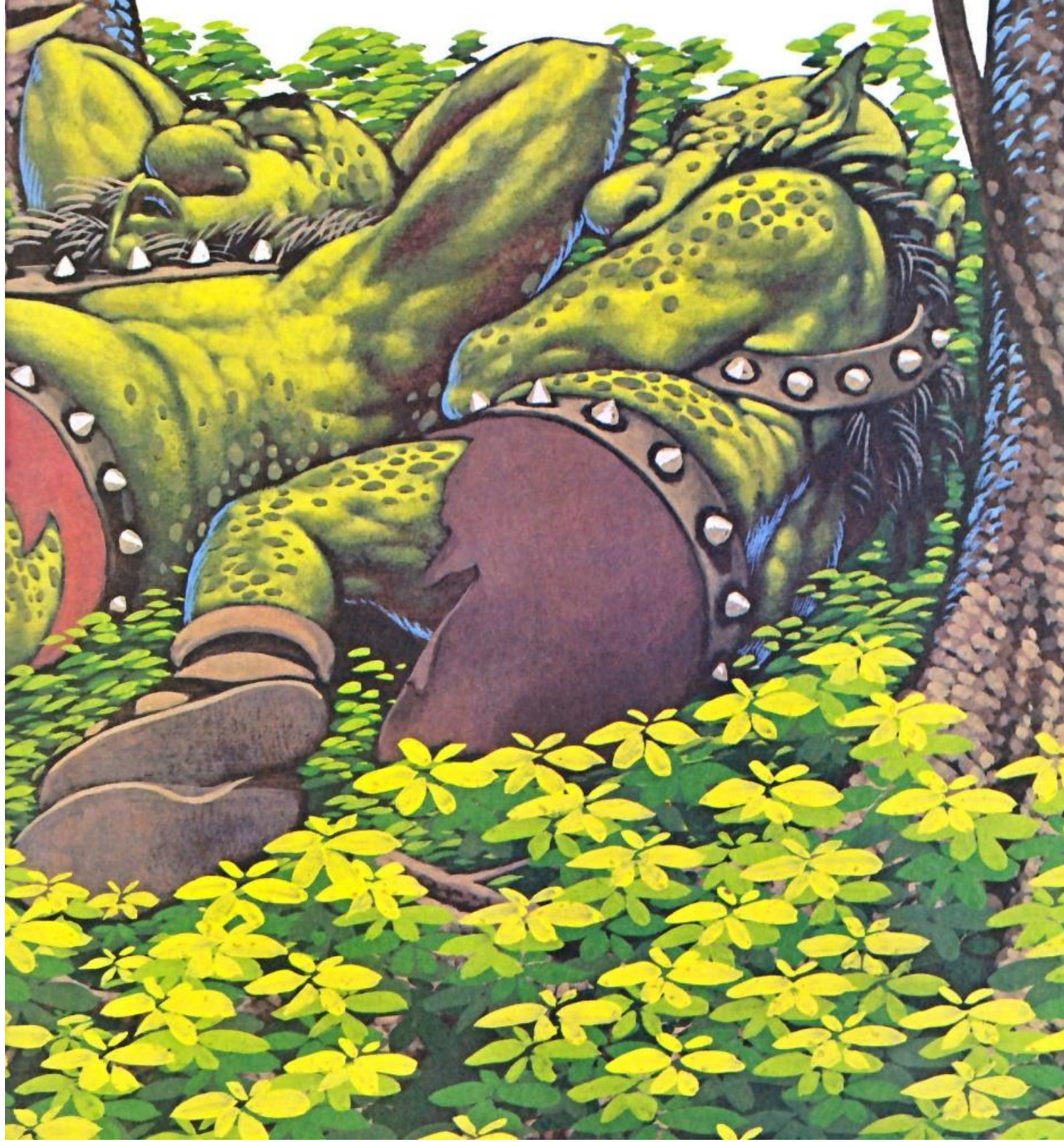
After a while one giant yawned and pointed toward the setting sun. Wicket shivered as he realized that the air had grown cooler. It was getting late and they were far from home. Just as he was wondering when it would be safe to leave, the two giants stretched out their long arms and lay down to sleep, leaving their ax stuck in the tree. Soon Wicket and Kneesaa heard a deep, rumbling snore. The giants were fast asleep.

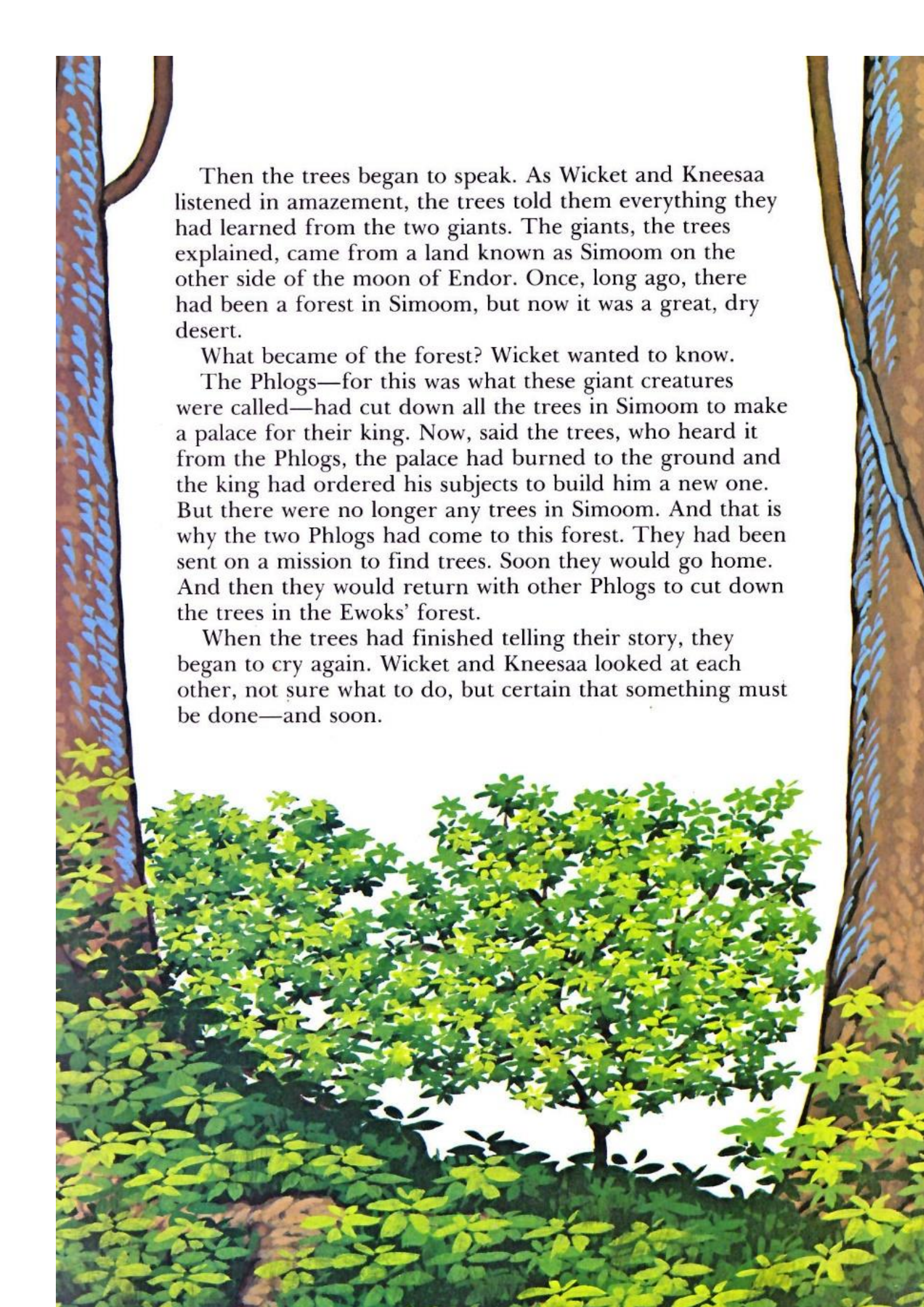


Quickly Wicket and Kneesaa ran back through the forest, stopping only to pick up their berry baskets. Just then the sad, low moan came through the trees and wrapped itself around the young Ewoks.

"It's the trees!" said Princess Kneesaa.

"Yes," Wicket said. "And it sounds as if they're crying!"



The illustration depicts a lush forest environment. Two large, brown tree trunks with blue and white textured bark are positioned on the left and right sides of the page. The ground is covered with dense, vibrant green foliage and bushes. In the center, a large, leafy tree with a thick trunk and a wide canopy of green leaves stands prominently. The background is a solid white color, which makes the green foliage and brown tree trunks stand out.

Then the trees began to speak. As Wicket and Kneesaa listened in amazement, the trees told them everything they had learned from the two giants. The giants, the trees explained, came from a land known as Simoom on the other side of the moon of Endor. Once, long ago, there had been a forest in Simoom, but now it was a great, dry desert.

What became of the forest? Wicket wanted to know.

The Phlogs—for this was what these giant creatures were called—had cut down all the trees in Simoom to make a palace for their king. Now, said the trees, who heard it from the Phlogs, the palace had burned to the ground and the king had ordered his subjects to build him a new one. But there were no longer any trees in Simoom. And that is why the two Phlogs had come to this forest. They had been sent on a mission to find trees. Soon they would go home. And then they would return with other Phlogs to cut down the trees in the Ewoks' forest.

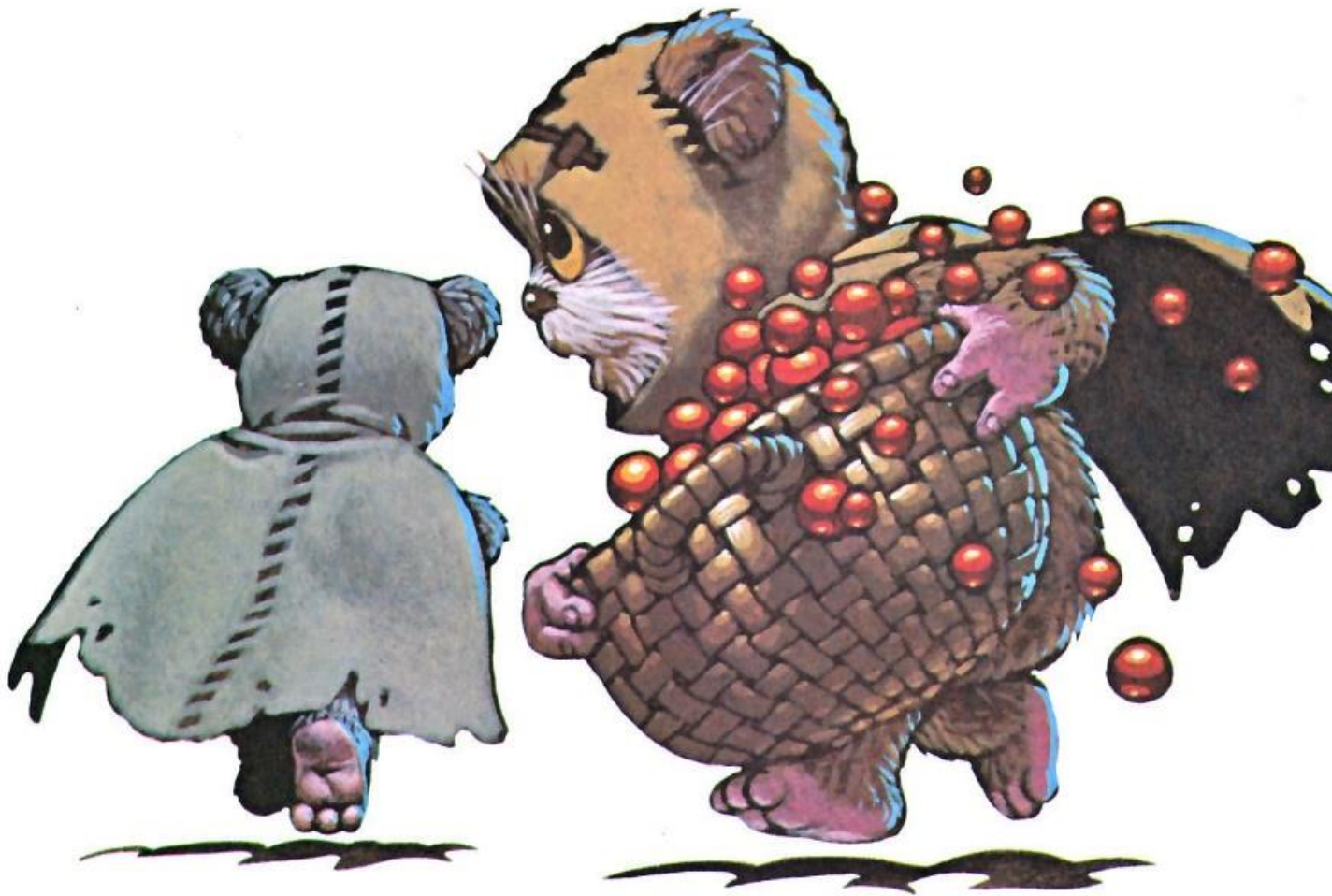
When the trees had finished telling their story, they began to cry again. Wicket and Kneesaa looked at each other, not sure what to do, but certain that something must be done—and soon.

Grabbing their baskets, they ran through the forest until they came to their village. Then they went at once to the hut of Chief Chirpa, who was not only chief of all the Ewoks but was Kneesaa's father as well.

"Father!" cried Kneesaa when she saw the chief. "Wait until we tell you what we've seen!"

And then Kneesaa and Wicket, in a jumble of words that spilled out of their mouths as fast as they could think them, told Chief Chirpa about the two Phlogs and their great ax and all that the trees had told them.

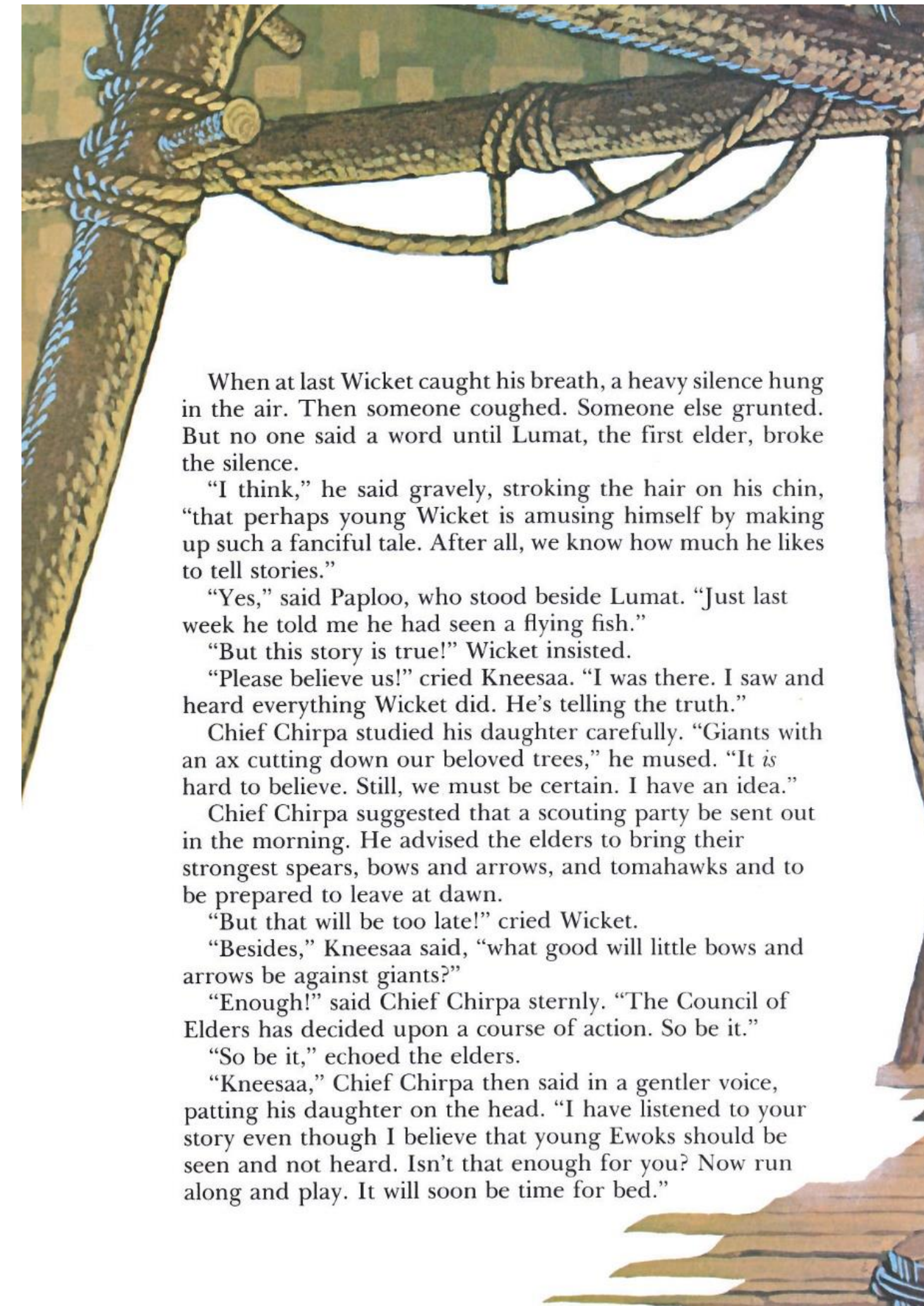
Chief Chirpa nodded slowly as he listened. When the young Ewoks had finished, he stood up and said, "I will call a meeting of the elders. You will tell them what you have just told me."



Soon all the elders of the village arrived at Chief Chirpa's hut. The chief sat on a throne made of twigs and vines and instructed the children to speak.

At first Wicket felt shy. He had never spoken to the Council of Elders before. But it was not long before he was telling his tale with great gusto. Every once in a while Princess Kneesaa tried to put in a word or two, but Wicket was racing on so breathlessly that she found it almost impossible to say a thing.





When at last Wicket caught his breath, a heavy silence hung in the air. Then someone coughed. Someone else grunted. But no one said a word until Lumat, the first elder, broke the silence.

"I think," he said gravely, stroking the hair on his chin, "that perhaps young Wicket is amusing himself by making up such a fanciful tale. After all, we know how much he likes to tell stories."

"Yes," said Paploo, who stood beside Lumat. "Just last week he told me he had seen a flying fish."

"But this story is true!" Wicket insisted.

"Please believe us!" cried Kneesaa. "I was there. I saw and heard everything Wicket did. He's telling the truth."

Chief Chirpa studied his daughter carefully. "Giants with an ax cutting down our beloved trees," he mused. "It is hard to believe. Still, we must be certain. I have an idea."

Chief Chirpa suggested that a scouting party be sent out in the morning. He advised the elders to bring their strongest spears, bows and arrows, and tomahawks and to be prepared to leave at dawn.

"But that will be too late!" cried Wicket.

"Besides," Kneesaa said, "what good will little bows and arrows be against giants?"

"Enough!" said Chief Chirpa sternly. "The Council of Elders has decided upon a course of action. So be it."

"So be it," echoed the elders.

"Kneesaa," Chief Chirpa then said in a gentler voice, patting his daughter on the head. "I have listened to your story even though I believe that young Ewoks should be seen and not heard. Isn't that enough for you? Now run along and play. It will soon be time for bed."

"Run along and play," Wicket muttered as he and Kneesaa left the chief's hut. "They don't understand! Grownups never do!"

"I know!" Kneesaa said suddenly. "Let's talk to Logray. He'll know what we should do."

"That's a great idea!" Wicket agreed.

And the two Ewoks set off to visit their friend Logray, the oldest Ewok of their tribe. Logray lived by himself in a little hut on the far edge of the village. For years he'd kept pretty much to himself. It wasn't that he didn't like the other Ewoks or that they didn't like him; it was more that no one knew quite what to make of Logray. He was the only one of the older Ewoks who still understood the language of the trees. In fact, he seemed to know more about many things than did any of the other Ewoks. Some thought he was a wizard. A few admitted that they were afraid of him. But none of these were children. For the young Ewoks loved Logray and spent hours of their time with him. As for the grownup Ewoks, their paths crossed Logray's only when they were sick, for he was always able to cure them with his special healing herbs and powders.

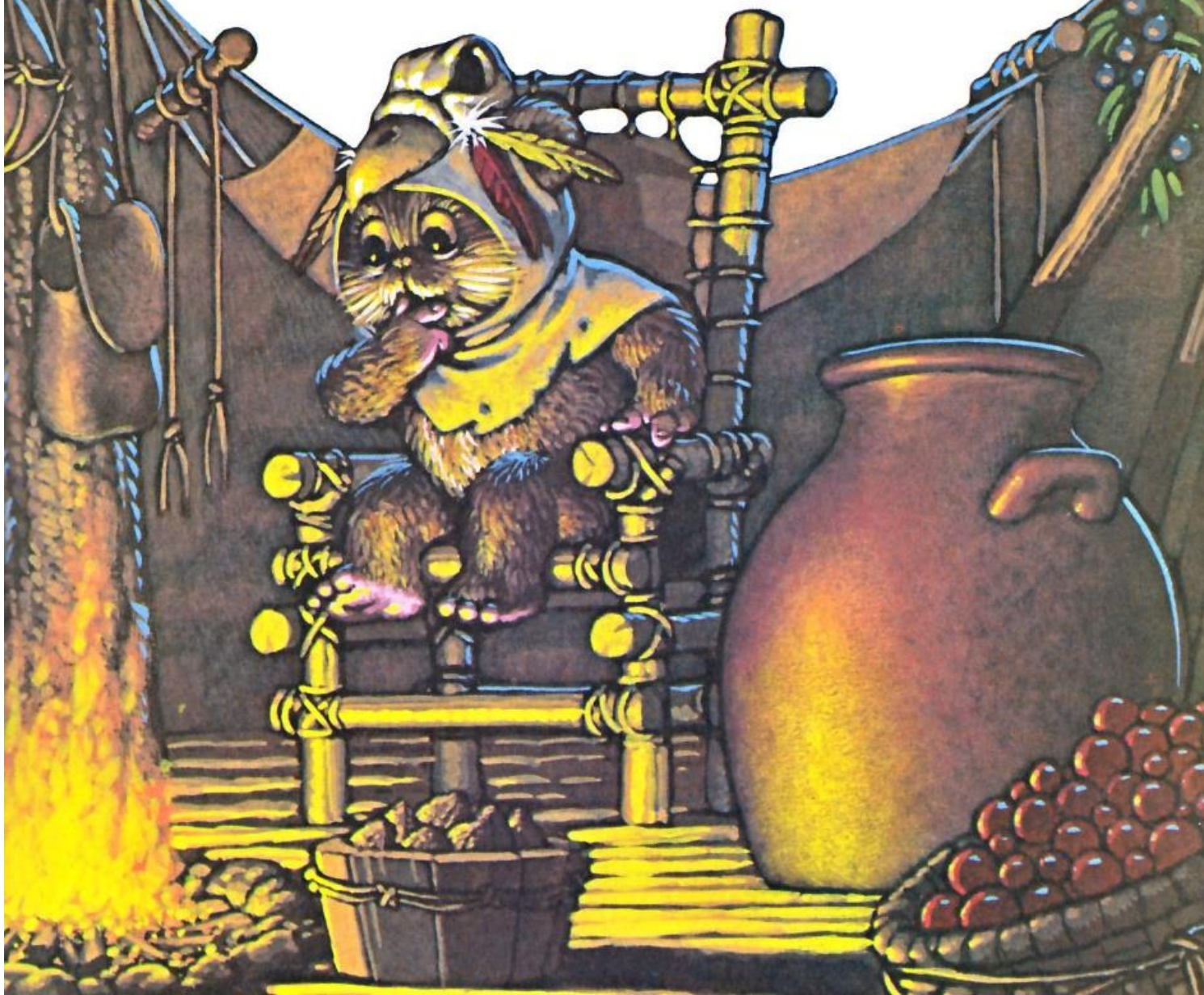


That night Logray did not speak for a long time after Wicket and Kneesaa had told him their story. He just settled back in his chair and stared into the darkness outside his window. The young Ewoks exchanged a look: Had they been wrong to think Logray would be able to help them?

Finally, letting out a great sigh, Logray turned to face Wicket and Kneesaa. He looked deeply into their eyes as he spoke.

"The trees were correct," he said. "The Phlogs do come from the other side of Endor. But what they did not tell you is that the Phlogs endanger not only our precious trees but our very lives as well."

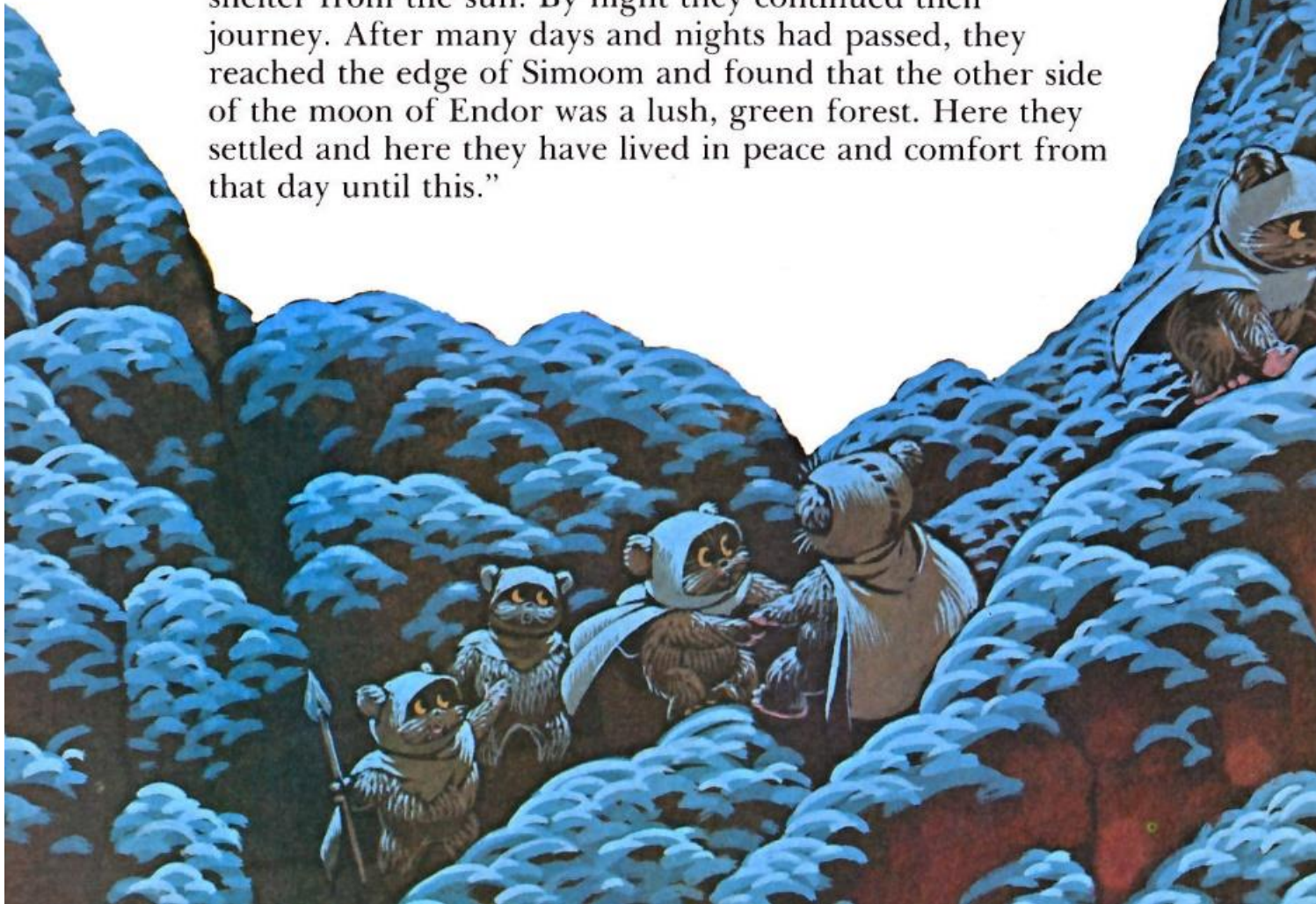
At that moment a forest bird hooted in the still night air and made both Wicket and Kneesaa jump.



"I will tell you a story," Logray went on, "one long forgotten by most Ewoks. It was told to me by my own grandfather when I was a child.

"Many, many years ago, long before you or your parents or grandparents, or even your great-grandparents, were born, the Ewoks lived on the other side of Endor, in the land known as Simoom. They did not make their home in the desert—for to this day Ewoks cannot bear the heat of the desert sun—but in a small patch of green, the only forest in all of Simoom. Here the trees protected them not only from the sun but from the Phlogs who lived in the desert around them.

"One day the Phlogs decided to build a palace for their king. They looked around and saw that there was only one material from which to build: the tall, strong trees of the forest. They chopped them all down in no time at all, leaving the Ewoks open to the burning rays of the sun and, worse, to the whims of the big and powerful Phlogs. Under the cover of night, the Ewoks fled the place that had been their home for many, many years. By day they tried to find shelter from the sun. By night they continued their journey. After many days and nights had passed, they reached the edge of Simoom and found that the other side of the moon of Endor was a lush, green forest. Here they settled and here they have lived in peace and comfort from that day until this."





Logray turned his gaze to the window, once more lost in thought. The bird hooted again in the darkness, but this time neither Wicket nor Kneesaa jumped, for they were under the spell of Logray's story.

"Now the Phlogs are back among us," Logray said in his deep voice. "If we wait for the scouting party to go out in the morning, it may be too late. I have a plan. It will be difficult and very dangerous and it may not work, but you must try. Take this powder and put it into the Phlogs' food while they are sleeping. When they eat it, they will forget everything they have seen on this side of Endor—including the trees. Instead, they will believe that this is an enchanted place, full of danger to all the Phlogs. They will leave, vowing never to return."

Logray gave Wicket and Kneesaa each a small sack of white powder and bid them hurry into the forest before the Phlogs awakened.

Clutching their sacks tightly, the young Ewoks said good-bye to their friend Logray and ran quickly across the bridge that separated his hut from the rest of the village. Suddenly Wicket came to a halt.

"Watch out," he whispered to Kneesaa. "We don't want our parents to see us."

But it was too late.

"So there you are," cried Wicket's mother in the distance. She was holding a lamp aloft. "I've been looking all over for you. Kneesaa, your father wants you to go right home."

Sadly the two young Ewoks looked at each other. What were they to do now?

"We'll meet in the morning," Kneesaa suggested, "before the sun comes up. Sneak out of your bed and meet me at the bridge. If we're lucky, we'll get to the Phlogs before they wake up."

"Don't let your father see your sack of magic powder," Wicket said. Reluctantly the two friends said good night and went off to their beds.

Wicket and Kneesaa hardly slept that night. They couldn't wait until the first glimmer of dawn, when their daring adventure would begin. They were afraid, but excited too.



At last they crawled out of their beds and crept silently through the village to meet at the bridge near Logray's hut.

"Let's go," Wicket whispered when he spotted Kneesaa.

Together they made their way through the dense forest until they came to the clearing where they'd left the Phlogs. The sun was just beginning to rise. From the deep snores that shook the ground under their feet, they knew the Phlogs were still asleep.

"We'll have to hurry," Kneesaa said in a hush. "We don't have much time."

"Look!" said Wicket. He pointed to a large bag that was lying on the ground several yards from the sleeping giants. "I'll bet their food is in there."

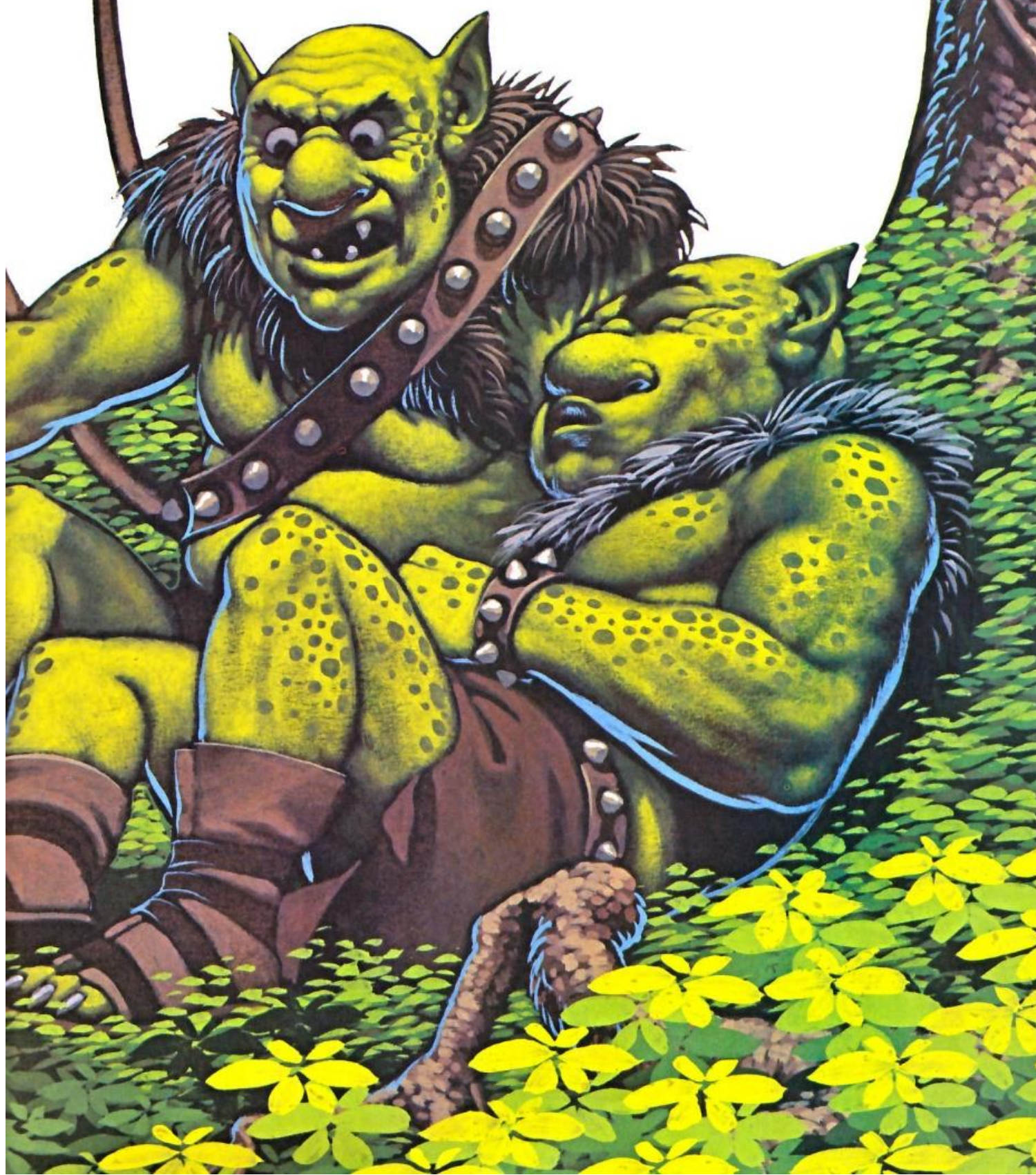
Without a sound Wicket and Kneesaa crawled toward the bag. But just as Kneesaa was about to lift up the flap, Wicket's knee snapped a branch in two.

"C-r-rack!" went the branch.



The Phlogs' great eyes popped open. Immediately they spotted Wicket and Kneesaa. One of the giants just grumbled sleepily. But the other arched his eyebrows menacingly and broke into a big grin.

"Run!" cried Wicket.



Wicket and Kneesaa started to run away as fast as their legs could carry them. But the Phlogs simply stretched out their arms and scooped the tiny Ewoks up into their enormous hands. Holding their prizes tightly, they rose to their feet.

The Phlog who had captured Wicket sniffed the Ewok curiously, then held him next to his ear and shook him, as if to see what was inside.

The other Phlog smiled as he looked at the frightened princess in his hand. He mumbled a few words in his strange, harsh language, then licked Kneesaa, as if to find out how she tasted.

"Ick!" said Kneesaa as the long, thick tongue rolled over her.

"Princess!" Wicket cried. "We've got to act fast before they eat us for breakfast! When I count to three, we'll throw our powder into their faces. Ready? One . . . two . . . three!"

Together Wicket and Kneesaa tossed the contents of the sacks Logray had given them into the Phlogs' faces. At first nothing happened. The two Phlogs just looked startled. Both of them sneezed, just once, and then they dropped the Ewoks to the ground and began to rub their faces, trying to wipe off the fine, white powder. Then, looking very confused, they became still. And a moment later they crumpled slowly to the ground and fell into a deep, deep sleep.



Wicket and Kneesaa wanted to believe that Logray's powder had worked, but at the moment they were too scared to believe anything. Just seconds before, they had been clutched in the fists of two hungry Phlogs, their lives hanging in the balance! Now they turned and ran into the forest to hide.

Cowering behind a large fern, they thought they were finally safe when suddenly they heard: "Crunch! Crunch! Crunch!" They looked at each other. Were more Phlogs coming to get them? They closed their eyes and held their breath.





"What are you two doing here?"

It was Chief Chirpa's voice. Wicket and Kneesaa opened their eyes to see the Ewok scouting party standing before them. They let out great sighs of relief.

Princess Kneesaa explained everything. Then she and Wicket took the elders into the clearing and showed them the two slumbering giants.

"So what you told us was indeed true," Chief Chirpa said, nodding his head.

"But what if Logray's powder doesn't work?" asked Lumat. "After all, he is a bit strange. He may have told Wicket and Kneesaa a story just to get them to leave him alone."

"Logray isn't like that!" protested Kneesaa.

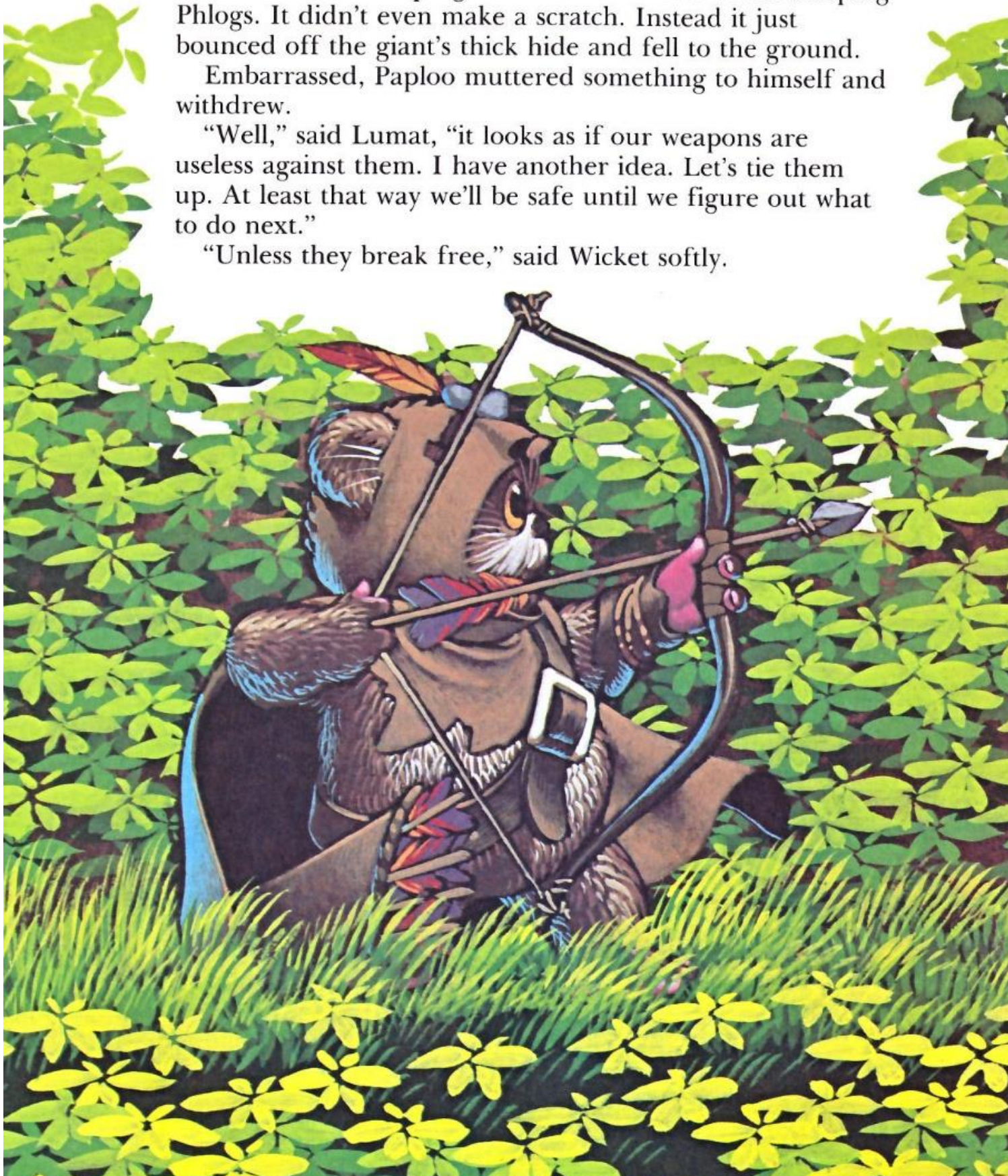
"His powder will work," Wicket said. "It just has to."

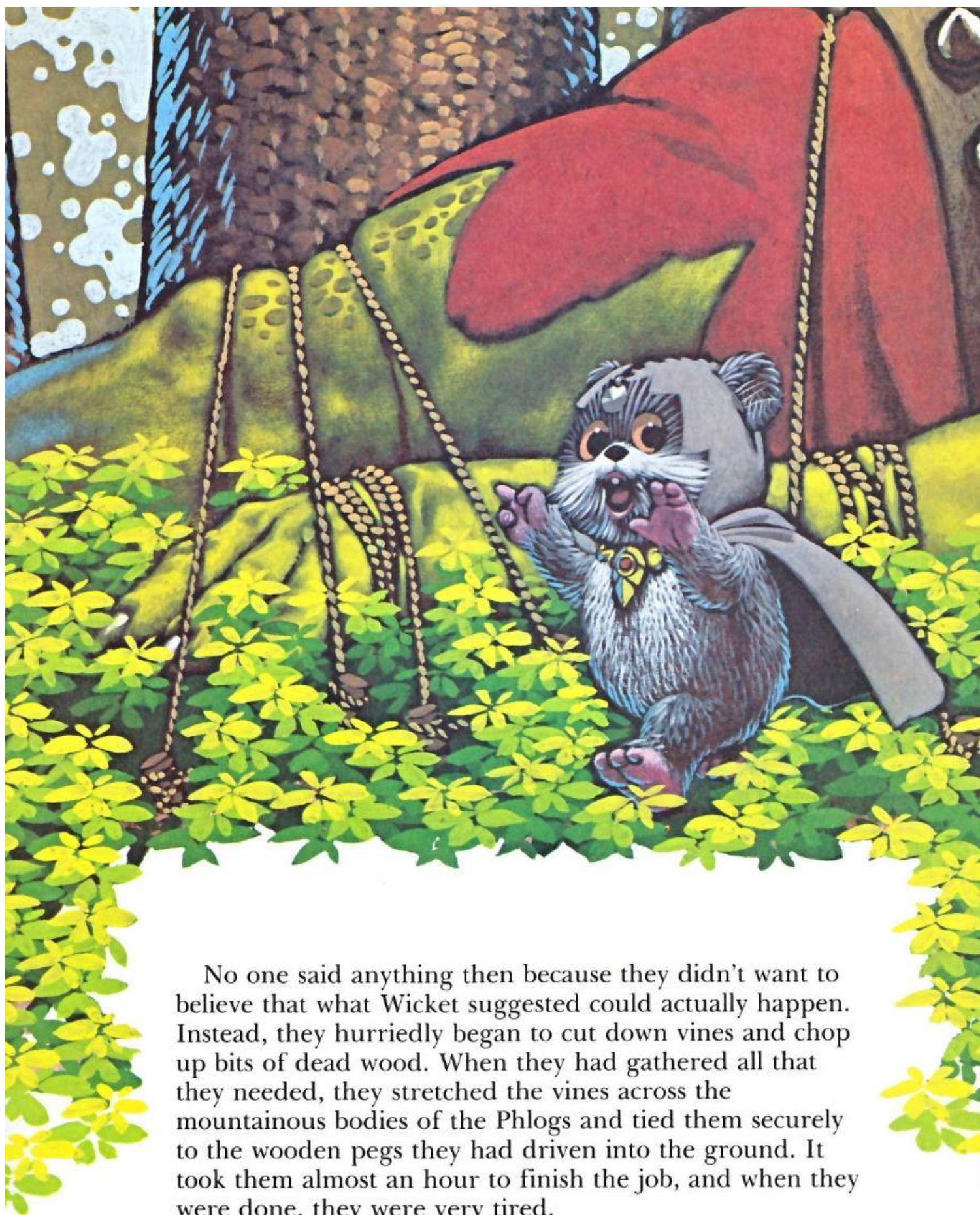
Paploo stepped forward and drew an arrow from his quiver. "I will take care of these giants," he boasted. He drew back his bow string and sent the arrow flying. Everyone watched as the arrow whistled through the air and landed with a "ping" on the arm of one of the sleeping Phlogs. It didn't even make a scratch. Instead it just bounced off the giant's thick hide and fell to the ground.

Embarrassed, Paploo muttered something to himself and withdrew.

"Well," said Lumat, "it looks as if our weapons are useless against them. I have another idea. Let's tie them up. At least that way we'll be safe until we figure out what to do next."

"Unless they break free," said Wicket softly.



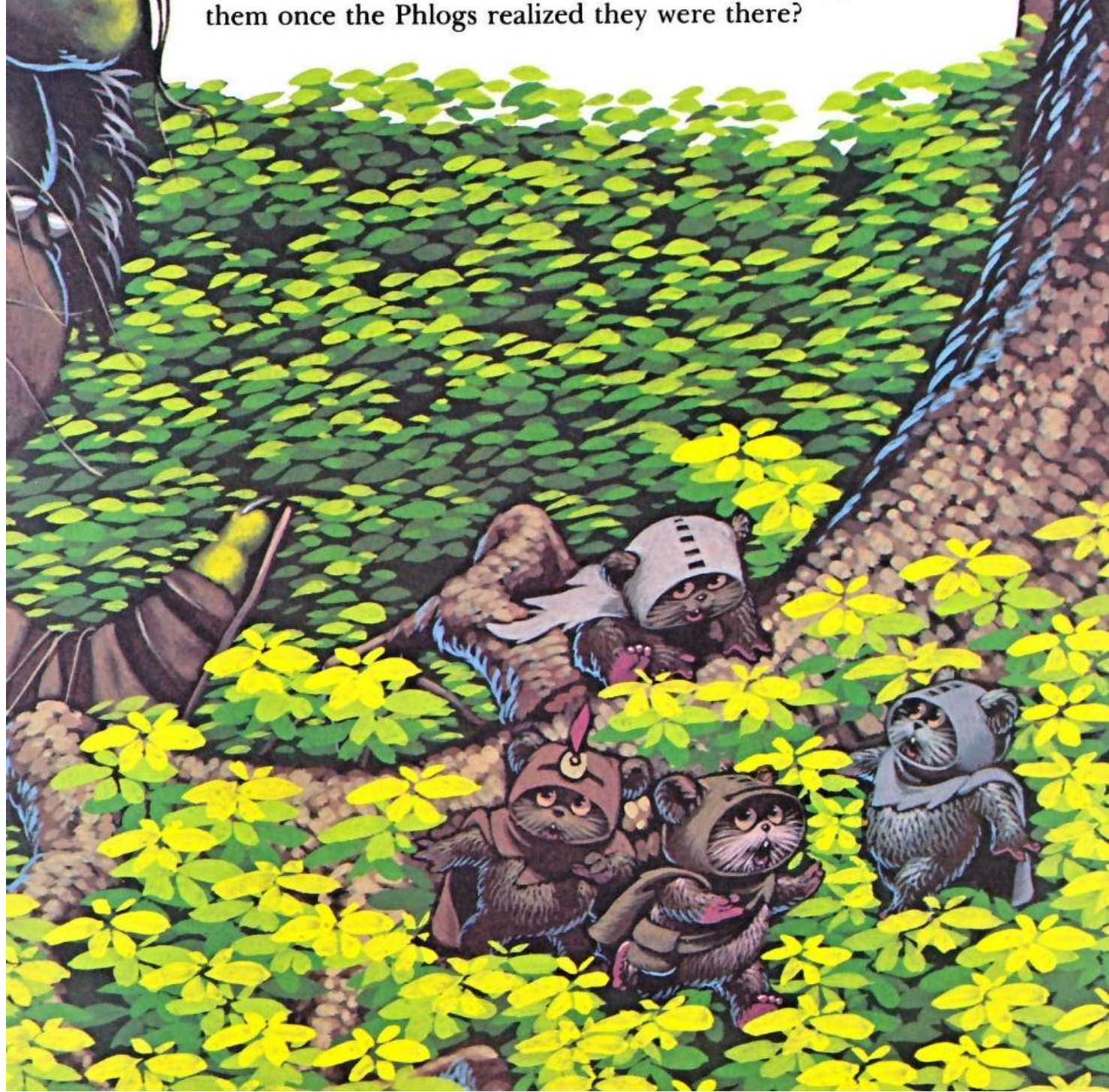


No one said anything then because they didn't want to believe that what Wicket suggested could actually happen. Instead, they hurriedly began to cut down vines and chop up bits of dead wood. When they had gathered all that they needed, they stretched the vines across the mountainous bodies of the Phlogs and tied them securely to the wooden pegs they had driven into the ground. It took them almost an hour to finish the job, and when they were done, they were very tired.

The Ewok elders leaned back against the trunks of the trees to rest. All at once Princess Kneesaa cried out, "Look! They're waking up!"

Everyone shrank back as the two fallen giants opened their eyes. Their brows furrowed, they rolled their heads from side to side as if trying to make sense of where they were and how it was that they found themselves waking up a second time that morning. Grunting, they tugged at the vines strapped across their chests. Would they hold? At first it seemed as if they would. But then, with little more effort than it would take an Ewok to brush aside a cobweb, the Phlogs broke through the vines and sat up.

The hearts of the Ewoks sank. What would happen to them once the Phlogs realized they were there?

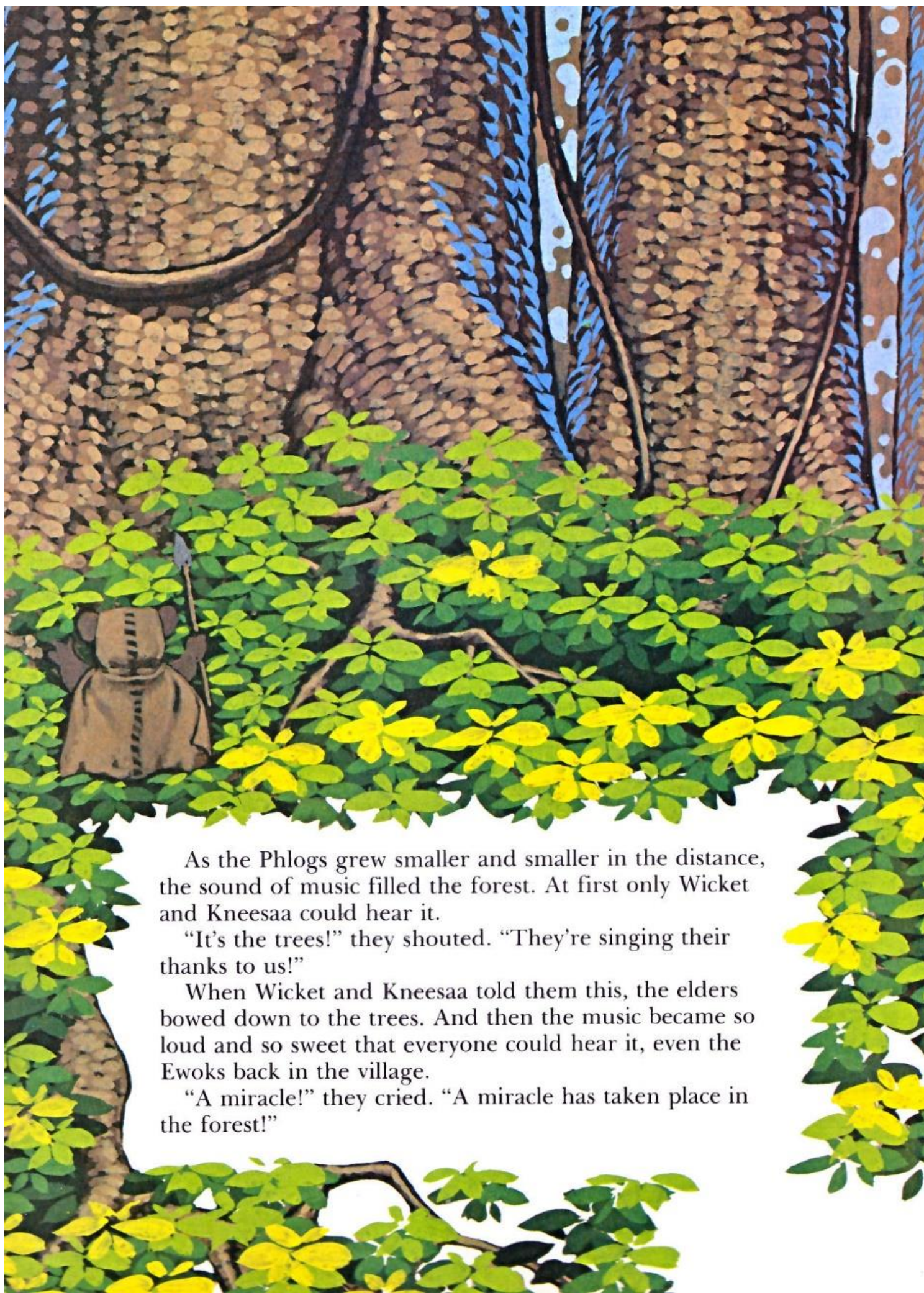


But then the look of confusion in the giants' eyes changed to one of fear. They pointed wildly at the trees and staggered to their feet. Without even noticing the Ewoks, they turned and ran off into the forest as if they were being chased by demons.

The cries of the Phlogs pierced the air as they ran. Only the trees understood what they were saying. The trees told Wicket and Kneesaa, who in turn told the elders.

"A strange and evil land!" the Phlogs had cried. "We must hurry home and never return!" Logray's magic powder had worked!





As the Phlogs grew smaller and smaller in the distance, the sound of music filled the forest. At first only Wicket and Kneesaa could hear it.

"It's the trees!" they shouted. "They're singing their thanks to us!"

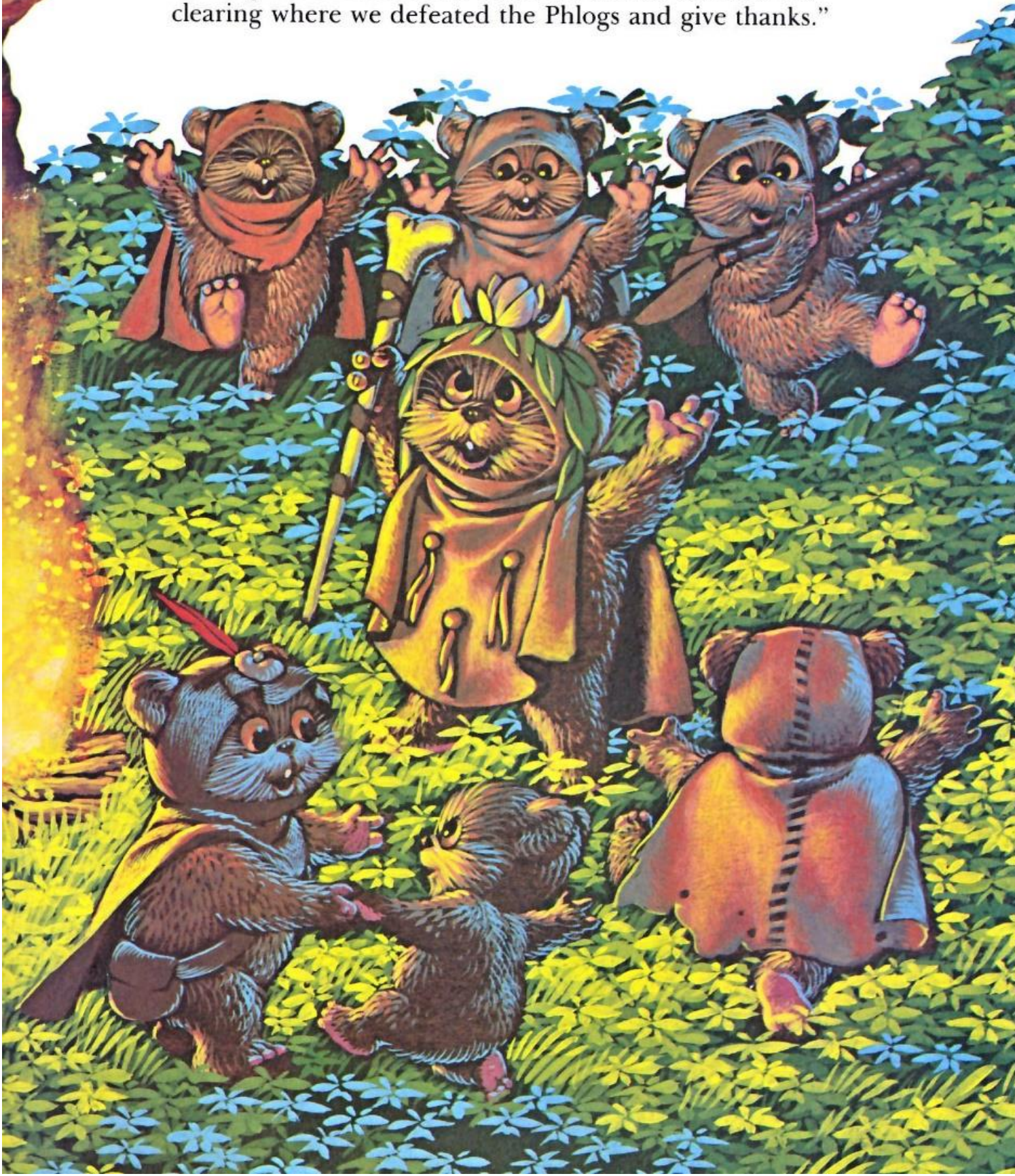
When Wicket and Kneesaa told them this, the elders bowed down to the trees. And then the music became so loud and so sweet that everyone could hear it, even the Ewoks back in the village.

"A miracle!" they cried. "A miracle has taken place in the forest!"

That night the Ewoks gathered around the bonfire to celebrate their victory over the Phlogs. Logray, coaxed out of his hut, was named Medicine Man, and Wicket and Kneesaa were made honorary members of the Council of Elders, the first time in the tribe's history that Ewoks so young had been given such an honor.



Everyone sang and danced until late into the night. Then Chief Chirpa pounded his staff against the earth and silenced the joyous Ewoks. "Every year," he proclaimed, "during the first moon of summer, we will travel to the clearing where we defeated the Phlogs and give thanks."



And to this day the Ewoks go every year to the clearing and bow down before the tree that still bears the mark of the Phlogs' ax. And as the trees sing a melody that can be heard by young and old, the Ewoks chant these words:

Trees and Ewoks,
Ewoks and Trees,
Always will we help each other.
Always will we live as one.

And that is how, once upon a time on a tiny moon called Endor, the Ewoks saved the trees.



The Ewoks Hang-Gliding Adventure

One windy fall morning three Ewoks were playing in a field near their village.

"It's a perfect day for hang gliding," said Teebo.

"Looks like stormy weather to me," said Kneesaa. "Besides, the Harvest Festival is almost here. We have chores to do this afternoon."

"We'll be back in plenty of time," said Wicket. "You're just scared, Kneesaa!"

"No, I'm not," said Kneesaa. "You can go hang gliding if you want. I'm staying here."

Wicket and Teebo went off to get their hang gliders. Then they walked up to the edge of a high cliff.

"Ready, set, go!" shouted Wicket.

The two friends jumped off the edge of the cliff.

"Wheel!" called Teebo as the wind caught them both and lifted them into the sky.

"We're flying!" cried Wicket.

Wicket and Teebo glided happily through the air, sometimes soaring high above the trees. Soon they were quite far from home.

Then suddenly the sky grew dark and storm clouds appeared. The wind turned cold and began to howl. It blew Teebo and Wicket around and around.

"Don't fly so far away!" cried Teebo. "Wait for me!"

"I can't help it!" shouted Wicket. "The wind is too strong!"

A big gust of wind blew Wicket around and around until he landed with a thump on the forest floor. As he struggled to his feet there was a loud thunderclap. Lightning split the sky and rain came pouring down.

Wicket saw a narrow opening in a rocky wall nearby. It was the entrance to a cave, and he dashed inside to get out of the rain.

It was dark and spooky in the cave. Wicket sat down against a wall, feeling lonely and a little scared.

"I hope Teebo is all right, wherever he is," he thought.

Just then a dark figure appeared at the entrance to the cave.

"Who—who's there?" called Wicket, his voice shaking.

"It's Teebo!" called a scared voice.

"You're safe!" cried Wicket. "I'm so glad!"

"But what are we going to do, Wicket?" asked Teebo. "We're lost—and I'm afraid. And I'm hungry too!"

"So am I," said Wicket. "When the rain stops we can go exploring."

The two friends sat in the cave and listened to the falling rain.

"I wonder what Kneesaa is doing now," said Wicket.

"She's probably eating lunch," said Teebo mournfully.

Back in the village everyone was getting ready for the Harvest Festival. Some Ewoks were cooking. Others, like Kneesaa, were weaving baskets.

Wicket was supposed to be scouting for nuts and berries. Teebo should have been chopping wood. Only Kneesaa knew why they were not around.

"I hope they're having fun hang gliding while we're hard at work," she grumbled to herself.

Logray the medicine man was busy stirring something in a pot. "I hope Wicket is off getting me those berries I need," he said to Kneesaa. "And I wonder where Teebo is. I haven't heard his axe this afternoon."

Then it began to rain in the village. "Maybe Wicket and Teebo are caught in the storm," thought Kneesaa. "They'd better hurry back here before they're missed. I wish I could send them a message!"

Then, as she noticed some smoke rising from an Ewok hut nearby, Kneesaa got an idea.

Far from the village the rain finally ended. Wicket and Teebo left the cave and walked through the forest, hoping to find their way home.

"I just can't figure out where we are," said Wicket.

"Kneesaa was right," said Teebo. "We shouldn't have gone hang gliding."

"Maybe we'll be able to see our village from a hill," said Wicket.

The two friends set out, carrying their broken gliders on their backs. They walked through the forest and crossed a stream. Finally they came to a clearing at the top of a hill. When Wicket and Teebo looked around, they saw some smoke in the distance.

"Look! A fire!" said Teebo. "Do you think it's in our village?"

Wicket looked at the smoke carefully. "Those are smoke signals," he said. "And they *are* from our village!"

"COME HOME NOW!" read the two friends together.

"It must be a message from Kneesaa," said Teebo.

"Let's follow the smoke," said Wicket. "It will lead us home!"

The two Ewoks trudged through miles of forest and meadow, always in the direction of the smoke signals.

As twilight fell they came to the top of another hill and looked down. There was the village!

"Home, sweet home," they sighed.

The first place Wicket and Teebo went to was Kneesaa's hut. Kneesaa hugged them both.

"Did you see my smoke signals?" she asked.

"Yes—and thank you, Kneesaa. You got us out of a real jam," said Teebo.

"Kneesaa, remember when I said you were too scared to go hang gliding?" asked Wicket.

"I certainly do," said Kneesaa.

"Well, I'm sorry," said Wicket. "You were right about the storm."

"Thanks," said Kneesaa. "Now you owe *me* a favor."

"Anything!" said Wicket and Teebo.

"You can do the rest of my chores for the Harvest Festival tomorrow," Kneesaa said.

"And I'll never tell the others that you were playing instead of working today," Kneesaa said.

"Well, all right," said Wicket.

"Is there anything to eat?" asked Teebo. "I'm so hungry."

"How about some bread and jam?" said Kneesaa. She took the food out of the cupboard.

The Baby Ewoks Picnic Surprise

It was a beautiful day in the Ewoks' village. The day of the Harvest Moon Feast had finally arrived, and the Ewoks had been preparing for the big event since dawn.

Princess Kneesaa finished her chores early so that she could play in the forest. As she passed a row of neatly thatched huts, she saw Mama Ewok and her babies, Nippet and Wiley.

"Kneesaa, could you baby-sit today?" asked Mama Ewok. "I'm going to the meeting hut to bake berry pies for the feast."

Before Kneesaa had a chance to say no, Mama Ewok picked up the babies and placed them in Kneesaa's arms. Then she hurried off.

Kneesaa wondered how she was going to keep Nippet and Wiley busy all day. "I wish I was outside instead of baby-sitting," she thought as she looked out the window. Just then she saw her friend Wicket walking by. He was carrying a fishing rod and a basket.

"Hi, Kneesaa," said Wicket. "Want to go on a picnic?"

"I have to baby-sit for Nippet and Wiley," said Kneesaa.

"We can take them with us," Wicket offered. "They won't be any trouble."

Nippet and Wiley bounced up and down. "Picnic!" they shouted happily.

"Let's go!" said Kneesaa, and they started off for the forest.

As they walked through the forest Wicket poked the bushes with his fishing rod.

"What are you doing?" asked Kneesaa.

"Scouting for rainbow berries," Wicket answered.

Nothing made an Ewok quite so happy as rainbow berries. Each summer the Ewoks looked forward to gathering the delicious berries. But this year few berries had been found.

Soon they came upon a beautiful shady clearing near a winding stream.

Kneesaa spread a blanket on the ground and opened the picnic basket.

"Bread, honey, juice—"

"And I'll catch some fish for lunch!" exclaimed Wicket, jumping to his feet.

"C'mon, Nippet, Wiley—I'll teach you all about fishing!"

"Fishing is like a game!" began Wicket.

"A game!" cried the baby Ewoks, clapping their hands.

"First," said Wicket, "I pull the fish out of the stream. Then you put it in the basket. Okay?"

"Fish!" said Nippet.

"Basket!" said Wiley.

"Good!" said Wicket, and they sat down on the bank of the stream. Wicket put his line in the water and waited for the first bite.

Wicket pulled fish after fish out of the stream. He handed them to Nippet, and Nippet handed them to Wiley. Poor Wicket! From where he sat at the water's edge, he couldn't see Wiley tossing the fish back into the stream.

After Wicket had caught six fish, he walked over to the little Ewoks. "Time for lunch!" he said.

The baby Ewoks pointed to the stream and said, "Fish!"

Wicket looked in the basket and groaned. It was empty.

“Cheer up, Wicket,” laughed Kneesaa. “We still have bread and honey sandwiches for lunch!”

“Honey!” said Nippet and Wiley.

Several sandwiches later Wicket stretched out in the warm sunshine while Kneesaa gathered wildflowers nearby. “Baby-sitting isn’t so hard,” said Wicket sleepily. But he hadn’t seen the babies emptying the honey pot—all over each other!

Suddenly there was a loud BUZZ-Z-Z! A huge swarm of angry bees was heading straight for the baby Ewoks!

“Quick! Run for the stream!” cried Kneesaa. She and Wicket and the babies ran to the water as fast as they could.

“Whew, we’re safe!” gasped Kneesaa.

“For now,” muttered a soggy Wicket.

“Play here in the sun until you’re completely dry!” said Wicket to Nippet and Wiley. “Don’t go any farther than those bushes—do you hear me?”

The babies nodded sheepishly.

“We’ll be watching you,” added Kneesaa, “so don’t get into any more trouble!”

Wicket and Kneesaa cleaned up their picnic things and decided to swing on the vines.

While the babies played hide-and-seek on the ground, Wicket and Kneesaa scrambled up the vines that hung from a nearby tree. They sat high in the tree’s branches, enjoying the cool afternoon breeze.

Finally Kneesaa said, “We’d better check on Nippet and Wiley.”

“They’re being *too* quiet,” agreed Wicket.

And sure enough, when they slid down the vines a terrible sight met their eyes!

The baby Ewoks were covered in berry juice!

“Nippet, Wiley, what have you done now?” cried Kneesaa as she dropped to the ground.

Wicket puffed along behind her. “What do you have to say for yourselves?” he demanded angrily.

“Mmmm...” said the babies, licking their fingers.

“Wicket, they’re rainbow berries!” Kneesaa gasped, pointing to the bushes the babies were playing in.

The Ewoks were overjoyed. With all these rainbow berries, the Harvest Moon Feast would be truly wonderful! Wicket and Kneesaa filled their baskets to the top with the colorful berries and started for home.

“These babies really saved the day!” said Kneesaa as they hurried back to the village. “We never would have found the berries without Nippet and Wiley.”

That night at the feast all the Ewoks lined up happily for Rainbow Berry Pie.

“Hooray for Nippet and Wiley!” shouted the Ewoks.

“Thanks to Wicket and Kneesaa it has been a very special Harvest Moon Feast,” said Mama Ewok. “The next time I need baby-sitters, I won’t call anyone else!”

Three Cheers For Kneesaa

It was a beautiful, sunny day and the annual midsummer festival of the Ewoks had just begun. The village was decorated with brightly colored chains of flowers, there were all kinds of good things to eat, and the contests were about to start.

All the Ewoks were excited and eager to show what they could do best.

"You're the best basket weaver on Endor," Wicket said to his friend Princess Kneesaa. "You're sure to win first prize in the basket-weaving contest!"

"That's the trouble," said Kneesaa. "I already *know* what I'm best at. I wish I could surprise everyone by winning some other contest too."

"Well, I'm going to enter the archery contest and win," boasted Wicket.

"I love archery!" said Kneesaa.

"You wouldn't have a chance of winning *that* contest," scoffed Wicket.

"Girls aren't any good at sports." And he ran off.

"I'll show Wicket," Kneesaa decided. "*I'll* enter the archery contest too."

She wandered over to the tables piled high with nuts and berries. First she tried some berries. Then she sampled the nuts. Everything was delicious!

"I'll just take some more berries with me for energy," Kneesaa said, and she put them in her pockets.

"Contestants for the archery contest, line up here!" said Teebo. He stared at Kneesaa, who was the only girl in line.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Girls are good at archery too," Kneesaa said to him, munching the berries.

Then she took her position, holding her bow with an arrow in place.

But when Kneesaa aimed her arrow at the target, she hiccuped. Then she hiccuped again.

Just as she let her arrow fly toward its mark, she hiccuped a third time. Her hand shook, and her arrow flew into the woods.

"Whoops! I guess I ate those berries too fast," she thought unhappily.

Wicket had seen everything.

"Stick to your basket making, Kneesaa," he said, laughing, "and leave the archery to us boys."

"There are plenty of other sports contests," Kneesaa said. "And I'll win one—just you wait and see!"

Kneesaa looked at the list of contests posted on a tree.

"I could do pretty well at the vine swinging," she thought. In this contest the Ewoks had to swing from one side of the river to the other on a long vine.

So once again Kneesaa took her place in line with the other contestants.

When it was her turn, she climbed up to a little platform near the top of a tree. Then she grasped the vine and jumped off.

A cool breeze blew around her as she swung through the air. The river sparkled below her.

“Whee!” called Kneesaa. “This is fun!”

Then all of a sudden Kneesaa lost hold of the vine!

She tumbled down and landed with a thud—right on a log in the river below!

Kneesaa shut her eyes tightly and hung on with all her might. The log went rushing down the middle of the river, carried along by the current.

Kneesaa was so frightened that at first she couldn’t open her eyes. When she did, she caught sight of some older Ewoks riding on logs nearby.

“What’s going on?” she wondered. Maybe these Ewoks were there to rescue her. She certainly hoped so!

But suddenly—

WHOOSH! Kneesaa and the log went over a huge waterfall! But scared as she was, she hung on to the log and didn’t fall off into the water—even though the log sailed along faster and faster.

Then Kneesaa came around a bend in the river. There were dozens of Ewoks standing on the bank! They broke into applause when they saw her.

“Hooray!” they shouted. “Three cheers for champion Kneesaa!”

“You’re the winner in the Log Ride Contest,” Teebo called out.

The Log Ride Contest! Kneesaa could hardly believe it. Only the older Ewoks took part in this dangerous sport.

“Congratulations,” said Chief Chirpa to Kneesaa when she was safely on shore. He hung a first-prize medal around her neck. “I am very proud of you, my daughter. You have performed magnificently! Who would have thought such a young Ewok could do so well?”

Even Wicket was impressed. “I guess girls *can* be pretty good at sports,” he said sheepishly to Kneesaa. “I’m sorry for what I said before.”

The Adventures of Teebo

In a far corner of the universe, on one of the forest moons of the planet Endor, there lived a tribe of small furry folk called Ewoks. In a village perched high in the branches of the ancient trees they lived happy lives, with love and goodwill for their fellow Ewoks and deep respect for the Great Spirit of the forest.

As soon as an Ewok baby could walk, he began to learn about the forest world around him, about the family of trees and sky and soil and Ewoks, and about the Forest Father who watched over all. In long processions the children of the village marched the forest floor and high walkways, guided and tutored by the Ewok elders.

One of these young Ewoks was named Teebo. Teebo lived with his parents and his little sister, Malani, in a cozy hut of three chambers just off the village square. As normal Ewok children go, Teebo wasn't. Of course, he looked normal, with his brindle-brown fur and sparkling green eyes. He did normal chores, like caring for the tree that was planted on the day of his birth and thatching the walls of the family hut. Like all young Ewoks, Teebo knew the strange, unspoken language of the trees, and he especially loved to listen to all the Ewok legends that he would someday pass on to his own children.

But Teebo was different. He would spend hours sitting on his secret high branch in one of the oldest trees in the grove. In his perch he could daydream and watch the rivers of color that flowed across the sky. The sky colors seemed to sing a bright song to the forest below, but sometimes Teebo wasn't sure if he heard the songs or just felt them move past him like a stream flowing over smooth rocks. In these songs Teebo could hear different voices. He could sense the happiness when the voices rejoiced at the planting of a new birth-tree, and the sorrow when the voices mourned the end of a tree's lifetime.

When Teebo told his friends about the rivers of color, they laughed and made up funny rhymes about him and seldom invited him to join in their adventures. They said he must have fallen out of his tree house and landed on his head. Teebo never told them about the sky songs or reading the animals' minds or seeing the tree ghost. He didn't mind the laughter; he just wished someone could share his secret world. Teebo's parents decided he simply had a spirited imagination.

This, at least, was true. Teebo loved to daydream—perhaps a little more than was good for him. When the other Ewok children were learning how to make weapons to defend Happy Grove or which vines were safe to swing on or how the wings of their gliders worked, Teebo would sit in a daze, imagining himself doing battle with monsters or rescuing baby Ewoks from danger or flying high into the night sky to collect basketfuls of stars. "Teebo the Great!" the Ewoks would cheer as he sprinkled stars throughout the grove to light the village by night. "Hooray for Teebo!"

One brisk afternoon in the time of year we would call spring, the Ewok children were gathering for another excursion into the forest. Suddenly three Duloks came stomping into the village square, making such a racket that even Teebo was roused from his afternoon daydreaming.

Now first a word about Duloks. Although Duloks were distant relatives of the Ewoks, the two tribes had little in common. Whereas Ewoks were kind, sensitive, brave, and industrious, Duloks seemed to pride themselves on their rudeness and dishonesty. Most Duloks were lanky and ill-proportioned, with wide jowls and beady eyes. Verminous, patchy gray fur concealed their mottled pink underhides. Although the Ewoks tolerated the Duloks out of respect for the forest and all its inhabitants, there were many Ewok superstitions concerning Duloks. All in all, Ewoks avoided them whenever possible.

“Ewoks, Ewoks, to arms, to arms!” shouted the Dulok leader, whose name was Vulgarr. “A creature of dread has stolen one of your children. Look!” Vulgarr went to the rail and pointed down to the bank of the stream that wound through the Ewoks’ grove. There in the mud, the prints of giant feet led off into the forest.

All the Ewoks in the village pushed fearfully to the railing and gasped. None among them had ever seen footprints so large before.

“I saw it all,” said Vulgarr, raising his voice for attention. “The little one wore a red feather in her hood and carried this.” Vulgarr held up a ragged Ewok doll made of straw. “The poor child dropped it when the wicked beast grabbed her.”

Teebo’s mother, whose name was Batcheela, fought back tears; she knew the doll belonged to her daughter, Malani. Teebo’s father, whose name was Warok, stepped forward.

“And why did you not raise an outcry, Vulgarr,” he asked, “so that we might have attacked the creature?”

“I thought only of the child, of course,” said the pompous Dulok. “She might have been injured had I interfered.”

Chirpa, the chief of the village, turned to the Ewoks whose duty was defense of the grove. “I will take ten of the best archers. We will track down the beast and rescue the child.”

At this, Vulgarr roared with laughter. “Ten Ewoks to slay such a giant? This long-haired monster is as big as a hut, with great fiery eyes and teeth as big as your hand and the strength of fifty Ewoks . . . at least! Many times I have seen this creature stalking the woodland in the dead of night. He makes his own trails, and his wrath is as awesome as his appetite. Trust me. It will take all of your warriors to subdue him. But do make haste. Like many creatures of the deep and dark, this monster may dine at dusk.”

“Logray must guide us in matters such as this,” said Arbo, the legend keeper. “He is oldest and wisest and is close to the ways of the Spirit. We will send for Logray!”

“By all means!” scoffed Vulgarr. “While the kidnapper travels league after league into the depths of the distant forest! Farewell, Ewoks. You have been forewarned.”

“Wait, Vulgarr,” called Chief Chirpa as he looked around the circle of nervous Ewok faces. “Elders, take all the children to the stronghouse and guard them well. Any and all warriors who would help slay the creature, make ready your wings. We must search while shadows are short.”

“Ah, spoken like a wise warrior,” said Vulgarr. “But why hunt in vain? As king of all Duloks, I range my forests far and broad. I know where this creature makes his lair.”

“In truth, Ewoks seldom venture an arrow’s flight from home and kin,” said Chirpa. “Guide us then, Vulgarr, and name your reward.”

Vulgarr recoiled in mock horror. “What!? The king of the Duloks sailing the treetops on wings of sticks and strings? Not likely. Follow the Whispering River to the Canyons of Mist. At the third bend, look high on the canyon wall. There in a cave dwells the beast. Fair winds to all.” The three Duloks quickly took their leave.

Warok watched the trio depart. “Always and always the Duloks smirch our trails, play us their tricks, steal of our harvest. I have no trust for them.”

“True to form, the Duloks gain from our labors,” said Pondo, a younger warrior, “for the woods will be safer for Duloks as well after this creature is slain.”

“Warriors, to your wings!” shouted Chief Chirpa. “Warok will lead us. Mates and elders, watch over the children. We fly!”

The warriors shuffled quickly down the launchway as mothers darted around scooping up their children. One by one, the winged warriors leaped into the air. Banking and swooping and pushing their flutter ropes, they rode the great currents of warm forest air up into the sunlight.

Logray, the Ewok medicine man, hobbled slowly along a walkway high in the treetops. Old beyond memory, he knew that he would soon join the Spirit and a younger Ewok would take his place. Logray stopped to rest and watch the beckoning sky. Suddenly a line of flying Ewok warriors in full battle dress soared overhead, their legs pumping the kick ropes, their axes and clubs dangling. Summoning his strength, Logray hurried toward the village.

Meanwhile, the children were all being gathered into the central shelter. That is, all the children but one. Slipping free of the chattering crowd, Teebo hid in an overturned basket. From inside it he could see the last of the warriors leaping into the air. When the square was finally clear, Teebo crept across the village. His heart ached with dread at the thought of his captive sister, yet he trembled with excitement for the adventure to come.

Teebo raced to the racks of extra wings, picked a big, sturdy-looking pair, and strapped himself in. He had never actually flown before, but he had often watched the warriors practicing their landings and takeoffs. Slipping his feet into the kick loops, he flapped a couple of times. It wasn’t easy to remember what the elders had said about banking and turning. It wasn’t easy . . . Teebo had been watching the skyriders of color that day.

With a last look around, Teebo ran a few hopping steps down the launchway and jumped. Out over the green cavern of forest he flew. A rising surge of air caught Teebo’s quivering wings and lofted him up, up into the sunshine, up past the tops of trees. Teebo tugged and kicked and shifted his weight to no avail; he was too small and light to have much effect on the widespread wings. At the mercy of the wind, he watched in dismay as the formation of

flying warriors disappeared from view. Up he floated in his sunny blue world until he could see the whole forest spread out beneath him. At the curving horizon, land and sky merged softly in a blue-green haze. Higher still he drifted, up, up, up . . .

When Logray entered the village square, Arbo rushed to tell him the story. The old medicine man stood silently looking at the sky with narrowed eyes, as if distant voices called to him. Finally he spoke: "You describe a creature very much like the Grudakk. Among living Ewoks, I alone have seen the Grudakk, and alone I must go to—"

"Listen!" Batcheela interrupted. "The forest is as still as death, and in the air . . ."

All the villagers sniffed and listened, but there was nothing to hear.

"The Great Spirit has silenced his domain," said Logray. "Take warning. Danger approaches."

Silence. Not even a leaf stirring in the breeze. Then . . . a cracking twig, a thud, a gruff curse, the crash of branches, and a scream. Vulgarr and thirty red-eyed Duloks swooped down from above on swinging vines. Whooping and hollering, they crashed into the midst of the startled villagers.

Vulgarr shouted commands and swung a gnarled club of rootwood. Any Ewok, male or female, young or old, who passed within range was dealt a reeling blow.

Batcheela grabbed a clay pot and crashed it down on the head of a scrawny gray Dulok, then seized him by the ankles and began to whirl. Two attackers caught unawares were sent tumbling over the railing to fall yowling to the forest floor.

Just as Logray began to cast a spell on the marauders, Vulgarr sent his club skittering across the village square to knock the old Ewok onto his back. Then the Dulok sprang quickly and secured a bag of blue toadskin over Logray's head. Further spells were rendered harmless.

The villagers fought fiercely, but without their warriors they were no match for the long-armed Duloks. The battle was soon at an end. Dazed and bruised, the Ewoks were huddled together.

"Bind them well!" shouted a panting Vulgarr as he wiped the drool from his chin. "And now for our hard-won prize."

Vulgarr crashed into the stronghouse and, amid screams of terror, emerged with a baby Ewok. He lifted the wide-eyed wokling by the scruff of the neck for inspection.

"Not enough fur here to yield a berry pouch," said the leering Vulgarr, "but here's a meal fit for even me, the king of the Duloks." With screams of wicked glee the raiders pranced and

capered, tossing the hapless infant to and fro. The villagers sat shaking with fear for the lives of their children.

“Oh, do not grieve, fine mothers,” Vulgarr said with a laugh. “At least your warriors will return, unless the monster’s ghost should get them!” Amid gales of Dulok laughter, two of Vulgarr’s henchmen entered the square carrying a great slab of wood, hewn in the shape of a huge foot and covered with mud. “Here is your fearsome monster,” cackled Vulgarr. The Duloks drove the children out into the square and corralled them together.

“Take them to the wagon!” shouted Vulgarr as the wind rose and the sky darkened. “And with haste . . . a storm is nigh!”

From under the hood of toadskin came the ominous voice of Logray. “It is no storm you fear. You have done the Spirit a terrible wrong. Return our young. Go your way or even the spell of the seven oaths will not shield you from the Great Spirit’s wrath.”

Vulgarr threw back his head and laughed an ugly, howling laugh as the wind lashed at the village and the sky churned. “I’ll show you spells, wise man!” screamed Vulgarr, his eyes wild and staring. He raised his lumpy club and advanced on the bound and hooded Logray. The villagers gasped.

Suddenly a blue bolt of lightning leaped out of a cloud and severed a heavy branch high overhead. Vulgarr scrambled aside as the branch crashed through to the floor of the village on the very spot where he had been standing. It plummeted to the ground far below.

The Duloks ceased their laughter. Vulgarr shot a long, hateful look at the churning sky. Then he spun around and departed, followed by his nervous henchmen pushing the Ewok children before them.

With a last spiraling gust, the wind calmed and the sky cleared. The only sounds to be heard were the small sobs of the Ewok mothers.

Teebo drifted high above the ancient forest. Purple shadows of late afternoon began to crawl across the darkening land below. The sistermoon climbed the horizon and the first stars twinkled above, but to Teebo’s dismay they appeared no closer than they did from his village. At the thought of the village Teebo searched the landscape for a river or a hill or something he might know, but nothing looked like home. To the west, Teebo saw a tree unlike any he had seen before. Its trunk spiraled up to scrape the passing clouds and beyond. Around its base, normal trees seemed to press close. He glided high above the tumbled ruins of what must have been a once mighty fortress. From fallen ramparts and dank portals, flitting gauzelike figures watched him pass.

The cooling air was slowly lowering Teebo into a remote and alien part of the forest. Suddenly frightened, the tiny Ewok searched the sky desperately for any sign of flying warriors. Then he froze in horror. A hundred yards away, silhouetted against the pale

sistermoon, a large mantigrue flew with easy flaps of its big leathery wings, its dangling forearms and scaly head rising and falling with its wingbeats. How long had it been stalking him? Teebo sadly realized that he had taken no weapon in his excitement to join the hunt. With evil grace, the demon altered its parallel course and closed in on its prey.

Far away, in another part of the forest, the Ewok warriors banked and turned among the trunks of towering trees as the last light of day played on outstretched branches. Below, the Whispering River wound its way through the forest.

“Ready your weapons and be watchful!” shouted Warok. “We approach the Canyons of Mist.”

As the rocky walls closed in around them, the warriors rose on gusts of canyon-funneled wind. Soon Warok spotted the gaping mouth of a large cave. Warok, Chief Chirpa, and Pondo landed on a nearby shelf of rock and cautiously approached the cave while the others came to rest on a craggy bluff overhead.

“Malani! Malani, it is I, your father!” called Warok, peering into the hollow blackness, but only his echo answered him.

Chief Chirpa stepped closer and put his sensitive nose in the air. “These caves harbor a too familiar stench,” he sniffed. “Duloks have sheltered here.”

“And who but a Dulok would devour a lantern bird?” said Warok, pointing to small piles of bones and gray-green feathers.

“Look,” said Pondo, indicating loops of stranglevine arranged carelessly on the rock shelf. “Freshly laid snares. A Dulok may yet dwell within.”

From the darkness of the cave came a deep growling voice like rolling boulders. “A Dulok? No! Not a Dulok! The king of all the Duloks.”

The voice so startled Pondo that he almost stepped backward off the cliff. The Ewoks’ eyes searched the dark. A swaying glimmer of three green lights came forward from the gloom.

“Away with you!” growled the voice. “This is no rest perch for fuzzy imps. You trespass on the veranda of King Ulgo the Magnificent. Away! Away!”

The shadowy figure emerged. His light source was a crude wooden cage in which were crowded three beautiful lantern birds, their long tail pods glowing a soft apple-green. In his other hand the wizened, bent old Dulok held a long-handled flint axe.

“Forgive us, your majesty,” said Chief Chirpa, “but another Dulok king by the name of Vulgarr cited your cave as being the lair of a fearsome beast.”

“Wah, hah!” cried Ulgo, glowering at the three Ewoks. “Vulgarr is a moon-headed fool. I once traded him two scrawny birds for this fine fur vest.”

Warok, Chirpa, and Pondo stared wide-eyed with horror. The vest was made of Ewok fur.

“Slay him!” cried Pondo. “He is evil. He turns the skin of our people into a filthy cloak.” Pondo stepped forward with lance raised, but Chirpa held him back by his wing brace.

Ulgo hissed and spit. “Back, hairy vermin, before I have you made into a foot wipe.”

Warok, his anger rising in him, stepped close to Ulgo. “We go our way to search for my daughter, but first . . . lantern birds are servants of the Spirit, and sacred. They must always be free.” Warok grabbed the cage.

“No!” cried Ulgo. “My breakfast!” The mangy Dulok raised his axe and lunged for Warok, who sidestepped and swung aside, protecting the birds. Warok’s main wingspar struck Ulgo’s head and sent him stumbling. Over the ledge he went with a frenzied scream and much arm flapping. The Ewoks watched in horror as Ulgo plummeted toward the river far below.

“Ulgo will survive,” said Chief Chirpa. “He will hit deep water downstream of that large flat rock.”

“Thank the Spirit,” uttered Warok.

Just then a mighty wind from out of nowhere raced up the canyon. It howled at the rock walls and raised wavelets on the surface of the river. With tremendous force it blew Ulgo off his plunging course . . .

Whack! Ulgo landed in the center of the flat rock. He lay motionless. The wind subsided and all was silent in the deepening dusk. As was the custom when a forest creature died, Chief Chirpa whispered a secret oath.

“Vulgarr has betrayed us,” said Warok, “and I fear the worst for my daughter, Malani, and indeed for all of Happy Grove.”

“Yes, we were fools to believe the Duloks,” said Chirpa. “We’re far from home and night is falling. Flying the forest in darkness is deadly. We must pass the night in Ulgo’s cave.” Warok opened the cage and the three lantern birds flew skyward. But instead of flying away, the birds began to circle above in the indigo sky, crying a strange warbling call. From the treetops and cliffs and distant hills, other lantern birds joined them. Soon there was a great luminous swarm filling the sky.

“Here is our beacon!” shouted Warok. “Their light will guide us safely home.” The Ewoks leaped into the cool evening air and formed their airborne procession. The birds flew close overhead, lighting the way home like a ghostly, glowing cloud.

Over a strange and darkening forest, Teebo rocked in his harness in an attempt to lose altitude. The treetops were yet two hundred feet away. The mantigruie floated above, maneuvering from side to side, awaiting the moment to strike. Looking back, Teebo could see the fierce black eyes watching him as the taloned forehands clenched.

Praying a silent oath to his secret tree-name, Teebo tugged sharply on his left wingwarp. The wingtip dipped and splayed and threw Teebo into a rolling spin. Taken by surprise, the flying demon lurched into a flapping dive, overtook his quarry, and struck. The talons tore through Teebo’s wings and closed around his shoulder harness. Shrieking in triumph, the demon began to tow Teebo upward. Teebo writhed and kicked the air and pounded the sinewy forearms with his fists to no avail. Releasing the knotted clasp that held the body straps, Teebo twisted and climbed up and over the leading wingspar. With all his strength, he sank his teeth into the bony wrists. With a screech of shock, the demon kicked free and released the wing, but the talons caught, tearing a gaping hole. The wing fell, tumbling, with Teebo clinging to the struts. Again the demon dove in pursuit, screaming with rage. Teebo saw the black fingers of the treetops reaching up for him. He closed his eyes and braced for the clawing of outstretched branches, but down he fell, past the treetops, down into the utter darkness of the forest at night. With a crash of splintering wings, Teebo landed in a big thicket of wiggewood. He crawled free into a tiny clearing. Above, the demon circled in anger. Teebo wondered at the dense ceiling of foliage. It was almost as if the branches had parted to let him pass, then closed behind him.

Cautiously Teebo surveyed his surroundings. The sistermoon climbed behind racks of gray, scudding clouds. A chill wind stirred the carpet of leaves. Beyond the near circle of trees, the darkness was deep and silent. Teebo could see no farther than a few yards in any direction, and all directions looked the same. He imagined the night crowded with vast shapes that watched him from just beyond the clearing.

Desperately Teebo tried to remember the lessons the elders had taught him. He searched the patterns of stars overhead. Which stars formed the flying snake whose eyes looked north? Teebo stumbled over a bellberry bush. Did the blossoms point east or west at sunset? Or was it sunrise? Which branches did the elders say were best for fire starting? Teebo suddenly felt very small and foolish.

From the depths of the darkness a distant rhythmic rustle, like dozens of feet marching the forest floor, reached Teebo’s ears. Pulling a broken strut from the wreckage of his wings, he crouched in a bed of scrubwort. Through the trees he watched three tall black shapes approach on a winding forest path. The sistermoon broke through clouds and shone on waxy red skin and upward-curling fangs. Yuzzums! Teebo sank lower into the shrubbery and lay stone still. The Yuzzums rode spindly spider creatures nine feet tall with luminous yellow clusters of searching eyes.

At the wiggewood bush, the procession stopped. The lead Yuzzum poked the brush with a long forked lance while the spider things slowly looked this way and that. One of the creatures seemed to be staring right at Teebo. It began to sound a low hissing moan. Teebo trembled and tried to sink lower into the scrubwort. A twig snapped under him. Suddenly three clusters of yellow eyes stared at him!

Teebo leaped from his hiding place and ran with all his strength through the darkness. Over logs, through burr brush, between trees, he ran. He looked back and saw three shadowy loping shapes, each with its sulfurous clump of eyes, weaving through the murk.

Teebo burst from the trees into a large meadow. The grass underfoot shone like silver in the wan moonlight. With his breath rasping in his throat, Teebo made desperately for the far bank of the woods. Unhindered by the trees, the spider things gained rapidly. The Yuzzums vented raucous cries and steadied their lances. Teebo could hear the pounding of spider feet almost at his back. "The woods are too far away," he thought, tears streaming from his eyes. A lance whistled past his furry ears and into the grass as he felt the panting spider breath on his neck. With the last of his strength, the tiny Ewok ran for two trees that stood apart from the rest.

All at once, one of the trees seemed to uproot itself and jump right in front of Teebo. He ran headlong into it, but to his surprise found it covered with long thick fur instead of bark. Dazed, Teebo watched the spiders retreating in three directions, the Yuzzums clinging tightly and howling in terror. Then Teebo saw the source of the Yuzzums' fear. The tree trunks were not tree trunks at all but thick hairy legs. A hand as big as Teebo reached down and grabbed him as he tried to flee. With his head sticking out of the great furry fist, Teebo rode up into the night air. A face loomed overhead. Blinking black eyes, the size of Teebo's head, inspected him. Bucket-sized nostrils flared and sniffed, and a cavernous mouth curled into an enormous grin. The Grudakk!

Teebo was dropped into a pouch of woven vine. He struggled and wrenched but the pouch held firm. The creature turned and made his way into the woods.

Teebo sank to the bottom of his mobile prison in fear and misery. "Now my parents have two children to mourn," he thought, feeling stupid and ashamed. Through the coarse weave of the swinging pouch, Teebo watched tree after tree pass in the moonlight. His captor entered a grove so thick that path and trees merged into shapeless gloom.

The path began a downward slope as the deafening footfalls echoed off surrounding walls. Straining close to the weave, Teebo saw a giant downward-spiraling tunnel ahead, with torches stuck into hollows along the way. By right-angled turns, the tunnel opened onto a spacious lair excavated from dark earth. Roots protruded from the walls and ceiling. Against one wall of the den stood a massive hearth and chimney of stone slabs. A dying fire glowed under a huge cauldron.

The Grudakk set the pouch on the hearth, then blew the fire to life and stoked the blaze. Monstrous shadows danced up and down the earthen walls.

Teebo tugged and tore at the bindings, knowing that he was about to be another unhappy ingredient in Ewok stew. “Oh, Great Forest Father,” he whispered. “This is Teebo of Happy Grove speaking. I promise I’ll never run away from home again; I’ll listen to the elders and take very good care of my tree . . .”

Teebo was talking very fast now, because he could see the gleam in the Grudakk’s eye as he reached down for his pouch.

“I’ll never play tricks on my little sister. I’ll do all my chores! I’ll—AAAAAAHHHHHH!” Teebo’s prayer was cut short as the Grudakk upended the pouch into his hand. Huge fingers closed around the tiny struggling form. The hand moved toward the cauldron. Teebo would be boiled alive! Tears rolled down the fur of his face. Looking down, Teebo could see the bubbling surface of the stew. He could feel the rising steam. And then the Grudakk’s immense face was there, eyes staring, great nostrils sucking tendrils of steam. The creature’s other hand held a small branch, carved flat and scooped out at one end. He dipped the branch in the stew and raised it to his mouth. Pursing his lips, he blew carefully, cooling the branchful of stew.

“He’s going to taste it,” thought Teebo, “to see if it needs another Ewok!” Blinking with tears, he began to wail.

With a smile, the Grudakk popped the homemade spoon into Teebo’s mouth. His wailing stopped short and he blinked in total bewilderment. The stew tasted of wild lichen and mushrooms and sprig melon, but not at all like stewed Malani.

But then another thought occurred to Teebo. If Malani wasn’t in the stew, she’d already been eaten! Teebo thought of his little sister with her straw doll and the red feather in her hood. He began to wail again. The Grudakk was ready with another spoonful. This time Teebo could taste water moss and bellberries. The stew was really quite delicious.

Between Teebo’s wailing and the Grudakk’s spooning, the little Ewok consumed a hearty quantity of stew.

Presently the Grudakk tucked his prisoner into a hollowed-out log lined with fur and set the little makeshift bed on the hearth. The glowing embers warmed Teebo’s tired feet. With a huge yawn and a pat on the head for Teebo, the Grudakk curled up on a bed of straw. Teebo watched him in the ruby light of the waning fire.

“He’s going to keep me for a pet,” thought Teebo. “I’ll escape as soon as he goes to sleep.”

In seconds the Grudakk was snoring deeply. “Maybe I’d best wait until it’s light out,” Teebo thought, snuggling down deep in the fur blankets. “I’ll stay awake all night and escape as

soon as I hear the first dawn daddy.” Teebo wiggled his toes close to the glowing embers and very soon was sleeping the deep numbing sleep of total exhaustion.

The day dawned gray and dismal over Happy Grove. Logray the medicine man stood somberly at the center of a circle of sullen Ewoks, their heads hung in mournful silence.

Logray raised his eyes to the heavens. In his hand he held the most sacred object of Ewok magic: a branch from the Father Tree. Withered and brittle with age, it had been taken from the primal tree when the moons were young, in a time known only in legend. Logray raised the branch high and began to chant an ancient, desperate oath:

“O Tree, our Father, old as moons,

Listen to our plea.

Lead our spirits when we meet

Our deadly enemy.

Oh, hear your children, Mother Land.

Help make us brave and bold.

The foe who means your children ill

Is strong and hard and cold.

Your family calls, O Brother Sky,

For battle must be done.

Fair winds to be our guiding eye

To keep our family one.”

One by one, the Ewoks took up the chant. The warriors raised their weapons to the sky; the mothers held branches from each of their children’s trees. Soon the grove was echoing with a hundred Ewok voices. The wind rose and circled around and around the village. Louder and louder the Ewoks chanted and faster raced the wind, until its howling seemed to take up the sacred chant.

All at once a spiraling gust of wind whipped the branches from the mothers’ hands and sent them circling skyward. Boiling clouds parted to admit the little dancing clot of branches, and from the sky above came a light. Not sunlight or morning glow but a light of dazzling

brilliance to illuminate the little village and suffuse each Ewok spirit with a strange and wonderful radiance.

All chanting ceased. The Ewoks stood dazed. Only old Logray smiled a small smile of past things remembered. The branch in his hand was supple and green and bursting with new life.

No words were spoken. Each warrior made ready his wings and weapons and filed toward the launchway. The sun peeked over the far hills and began its climb into a cloudless blue sky.

Teebo awoke with a start and looked around. Dusty yellow light was filtering down the tunnel, ashes lay cold and dead on the hearth, and the Grudakk was nowhere to be seen. Teebo threw off his blankets and raced for the earthen stairway. He clawed his way up each Grudakk-sized step. Finally, blue sky and misty shafts of sunlight came into view. Just a few more steps.

Then a massive lurching shape blocked Teebo's view of freedom. Down the steps came the Grudakk. Teebo pressed himself into a corner as the enormous feet passed by. The Grudakk carried a basket of fruit and lichen and his pouch was stuffed with mushrooms.

Teebo scrambled up the last few steps and emerged into the forest. Through the dense and shadowy cluster of trees, into soft morning sunlight, he ran. Pausing to get his bearings, Teebo looked back at the Grudakk's lair. It was in the base of the biggest tree Teebo had ever seen.

Its girth was as wide as his village, and its high crown disappeared into the upper haze. Birds of every description flew among branches that were alive with the chirping of young. Teebo thought he heard another sound as well, one that reminded him of the tree songs of his home grove. His heart ached to hear the soft sweet sound from a time that seemed years past.

With a crash of underbrush, the Grudakk emerged from the mouth of his lair, his eyes searching right and left. Teebo turned and ran as fast as his legs would carry him. Over hills he ran, down into a shaded valley, through a bubbling stream and up another hill.

Teebo stopped in a clump of ferns to catch his breath and listened for the thump-thump of an approaching Grudakk. Instead he heard distant voices.

Teebo couldn't hear words, but there seemed to be an argument in progress. He crept cautiously in the direction of the voices and presently came to the edge of a wide meadow. In the center of the meadow were about sixty Duloks breaking camp. Nearby was a ramshackle wagon covered in a patchwork tarp of animal skins. Watching from behind a tree, Teebo recognized the leader, Vulgarr, arguing with another big blue-gray Dulok with a crooked tail.

“As king, I have decreed that we dine here and now!” shouted Vulgarr.

“You’ve been king too long!” yelled Crooked Tail as he picked up a short stone axe and stepped toward Vulgarr.

One of Vulgarr’s henchmen came from behind and crashed a gnarly club down on Crooked Tail’s head. The argument settled, Vulgarr rushed to the concealed wagon with a chuckle of glee. He jerked the cover away.

Teebo gasped. There, stuffed in the rickety cage and blinking in the morning light, were all the children of Happy Grove. The youngest ones whimpered as Vulgarr drooled and wrung his hands. “Behold the picnic of a lifetime,” the Dulok king said with an evil laugh. “We’ll have them fried and frizzled and braised and sizzled, stewed and simmered and grilled.” He jerked open the cage door. “Ah, and here’s a choice and tender one,” he said, reaching inside. Suddenly he screamed in pain and yanked back his hand; attached to it was little Malani, her teeth firmly clamped onto his thumb. Vulgarr howled and danced in a circle, falling over Duloks and campfires and swinging the tiny Ewok overhead.

Teebo stared in relief and confusion from the edge of the meadow. “The Duloks kidnapped Malani . . . and all the other children!” His brain whirled. He had to save them.

Two of Vulgarr’s minions finally pulled Malani loose and held the kicking, scratching furball at arm’s length. Vulgarr stepped close, nursing his reddened thumb. In his good hand he held Crooked Tail’s axe, and revenge was in his eye.

Teebo stepped into the meadow and hurled a stone with all his might. It struck Vulgarr in the shoulder just as he raised the axe. Vulgarr spun around with a roar of rage, to see Teebo ducking back into the undergrowth.

Before Vulgarr could shout a command, a branch fell out of the clear blue sky and hit him squarely on the head, then another and another. Branches were falling all over the camp. The Duloks stood mystified. When the branches stopped falling, a bone-chilling wind blew out of the forest and raced through the camp, stinging eyes and buffeting ears with icy gusts. As the wind whipped across the meadow it seemed to moan in a deep and ancient voice of woe. The Duloks looked around uneasily.

“We’ll move on,” said Vulgarr. “This meadow is bewitched.” The Duloks hurried around scooping up belongings, glancing fretfully at the sky. “And you, you’ll be my midday meal,” said Vulgarr to the struggling Malani as he flung her back into the cage.

With a yell, one of the Duloks pointed in the direction of the sudden storm. Riding the wind were thirty Ewok warriors, banking and braking to earth at the far end of the meadow.

The cage of young Ewoks shook with cheers and Teebo's heart leaped for joy. In the front line was his father, Warok. The warriors shed their wings and advanced on foot.

"To the cage!" shouted Vulgarr. "They'll not use arrows with their young so near."

The Duloks took up positions in front of the cage. Dropping their useless bows, the Ewok warriors brought forth spears and short stone swords. At a command from Chief Chirpa, they broke ranks and attacked. Yelping like banshees, they charged toward the Duloks, a few of whom became unnerved and fled.

At once Vulgarr seized a burning branch from one of the campfires and approached the cage.

"Halt, Ewoks, and feast your eyes!" he shouted. Vulgarr thrust the torch through the bars of the cage to elicit screams from within. Horrified, the Ewoks froze in their tracks, still forty yards from the wagon.

"Retreat, warriors!" cried Vulgarr. "Else here and now I roast these bratlings!"

Teebo saw his chance. He broke from his cover and ran like the wind for the battlefield. Dodging a retreating Dulok, he grabbed a stone axe and reached the rear of the wagon cage. He leaped and clung to the bars, and with as fierce a blow as he could muster, he cracked the hardwood hasp of the cage door.

"Run for the woods!" shouted Teebo.

The heavy door swung down with a flood of escaping woklings, pinning Teebo to the ground. The frantic children disappeared into the surrounding forest.

Again the Ewok warriors charged. Dodging arrows and spears on the run, they gained the campground, where a furious battle began.

"Protect King Vulgarr the all powerful!" shouted Vulgarr as he crawled under the wagon. "Duloks victorious!"

Outnumbered two to one, the Ewoks fought as beings possessed. Most engaged two Duloks, a weapon in each hand. Warok and Chirpa fought back to back, fending off the spears and clubs of five Duloks.

Just as Teebo struggled free of the heavy door, a bony hand grabbed his ankle. Teebo looked down into the wild red eyes of Vulgarr. The evil Dulok gurgled with wicked glee as he pulled the frantic Teebo closer.

The misty air filled with cries of pain and victory, the crash of stone on stone, and the eerie moaning of the wind. Fallen Duloks littered the meadow. As the odds neared one to one, more Duloks dropped their weapons and ran for the woods.

With a viselike grip on the scruff of Teebo's neck, Vulgarr crawled free of the wagon and hoisted him kicking and twisting into the air.

"Behold, Ewoks!" cried Vulgarr as he produced a short stone knife and held it to Teebo's neck. "Drop your weapons and pull back, or you'll take this one home in two baskets!" He pressed the point of his knife to the furry throat. All fighting stopped as the Ewok warriors looked to Chirpa.

"Set free the little one," said the Ewok chief. "We will go our way. Too much blood has spilled."

"This urchin is our safe passage home," said Vulgarr. "Look for him a day's travel north. Pursue us and he dies."

Leaving their fallen comrades, the surviving Duloks formed a tight group with Vulgarr and his struggling hostage at the center and retreated into the woods.

"Gather the children and tend to the wounded, our enemies as well," said Chirpa to his warriors. "Warok, choose ten who are fleet of wing. With luck and fair winds we—"

Suddenly the forest erupted with screaming Duloks. Gaining the freedom of the meadow, they scattered in all directions, dropping weapons and screeching with terror. Lastly came Vulgarr, his legs a gray-brown blur. His frothing mouth opened and closed but no sound came out. Slipping and stumbling, he zigzagged across the meadow. Then, with a crash of undergrowth and a parting of branches, the Grudakk emerged. In one hand he held Teebo. With the other he stuffed three Duloks into his woven shoulder pouch. Ewok and Dulok alike bolted and ran for cover.

In three gargantuan strides the Grudakk overtook Vulgarr and scooped him up, all the while bellowing in rage.

Warok and Chirpa darted forward in a desperate attempt to free Teebo. Their spears held rigid, the two Ewoks charged the massive legs of the towering creature.

"Hold!" said a familiar voice. Warok and Chirpa turned and were astonished to see Logray hobbling across the meadow. His wings were nowhere to be seen.

In his hand he held the supple branch of the Father Tree. Reaching the feet of the Grudakk, Logray held the branch high. The Grudakk gently handed Teebo down to Warok, who took the child and held him tight. From the forest burst Malani, who ran and jumped into her father's arms next to Teebo.

The wind died and all was silent in the meadow. From the edge of the forest, Ewok warriors and young peeked out and slowly came forward.

As the Grudakk reached for the branch Logray offered him, it jumped from Logray's grasp and flew quivering to the giant hand. The Grudakk held it close for a moment, then pointed into the distance. All the Ewoks looked. There, over a far line of hills, up out of the mist, towered the largest tree of the forest.

"Ewoks, come forward in peace," called Logray, "and share the secret of the Grudakk. Greet the guardian of the Father Tree."

From all around the ring of trees, cheering Ewoks rushed into the meadow to surround the giant Grudakk.

As they approached he set King Vulgarr on the ground. The evil Dulok stood stiff, his mouth frozen in a silent scream, his arms outstretched. The Ewoks stared, bewildered.

"Plant him ankle deep in the soil of this meadow," said Logray. "He needs no tending. He will grow into a twisted tree as ugly as the evil within him. If a single creature finds refuge in his branches, this miserable demon will finally have served his world."

With flying warriors leading the way overhead, a happy procession of Ewoks bade farewell to the Father Tree and his guardian and set off for home.

At twilight the Ewok village began to echo with song and cheerful voices. Families danced around blazing bonfires and held close their loved ones.

Weakened by the day's labors, Logray slipped away from the celebration. His time was near. Very soon his spirit would fly high to join the flowing rivers of soft color. He climbed slowly onto a high walkway and watched the beckoning sky and listened to the talking of the trees, and there he quietly came upon Teebo in his well-worn perch.

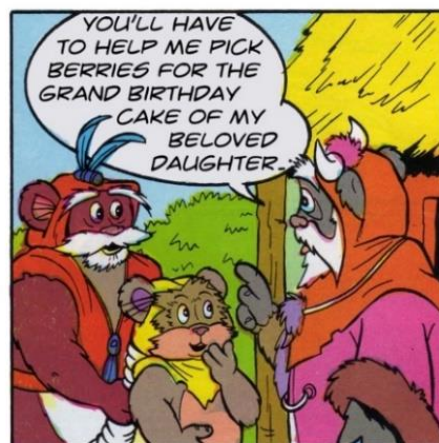
"Are the colors not beautiful?" whispered Logray.

Teebo turned in surprise. "You can see them too?" he asked, his face bright with wonder.

Their eyes met for a long moment, there in the last golden light of day.

"Come with me," said Logray, taking the tiny hand in his own. "There is much to learn."

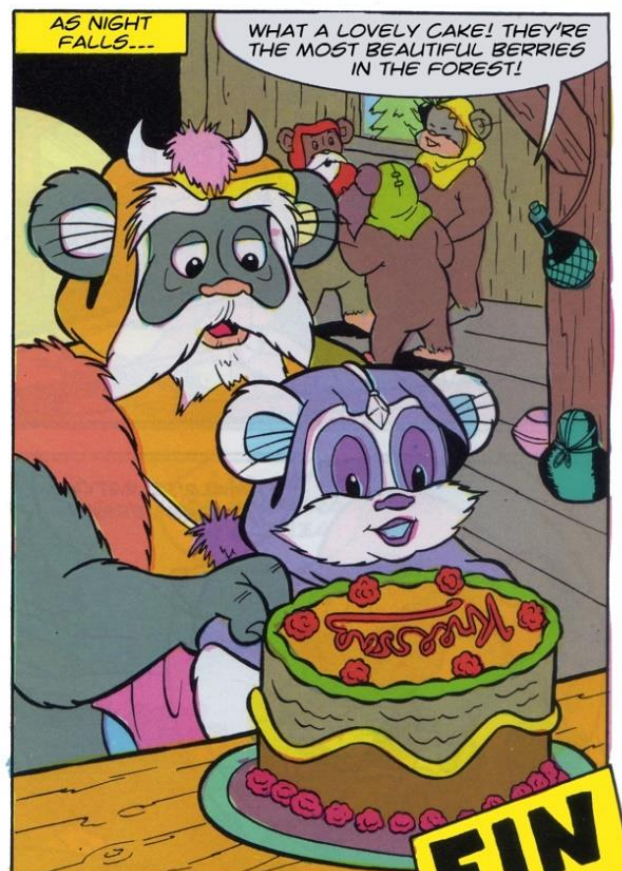
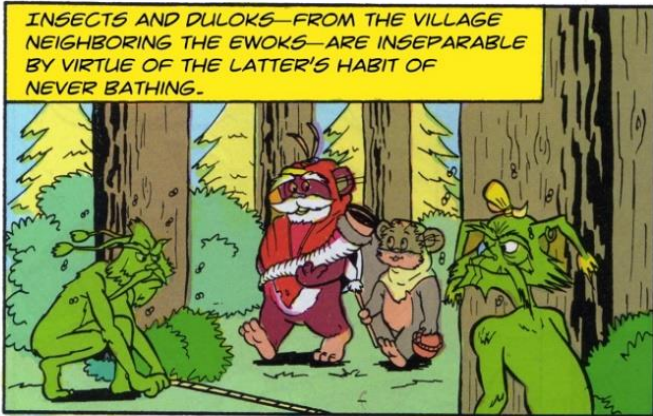
EWOKS IN PRINCESS KNEESAA'S BIRTHDAY



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FIN

Wicket Finds A Way

Ewok Village was blanketed in snow. Puffs of smoke rose from the roofs of each hut into the clear, cold sky.

Wicket trudged through the village on his snowshoes. He was glad that Logray's hut wasn't too far away.

Logray was the old Ewok medicine man. His hut was Wicket's favorite place to visit. Herbs, bark, and feathers hung from the rafters. Jugs of powders and potions cluttered the shelves. Wicket had spent many cold winter afternoons by the fire while Logray worked. But today he had come to ask the medicine man a very important question.

"Logray, I want to learn magic and be a medicine man—like you!" said Wicket eagerly. "Can I be your apprentice?"

Logray frowned. "You're still too young to know the secrets of a medicine man," he said sharply. "You're headstrong and hasty and you have too much to learn! Now don't trouble me with this nonsense again!"

Wicket was a good scout, but most of all, he wanted to be a medicine man like Logray. He longed to heal the Ewoks with magic healing potions.

"Now it will never happen," he thought sadly, remembering what Logray had said.

Wicket walked until dusk. He was passing his friend Latara's hut when he saw Logray rushing toward the door. "I wonder if Latara is sick," thought Wicket. He looked into her hut. There lay his friend, wrapped in blankets.

As Wicket watched, Logray sprinkled some powder in a drink for Latara. Then Logray turned to Latara's father.

"I need a fuzzynettle plant to make more medicine for Latara," he said.

"But that plant only grows on the far side of the forest!" said Latara's father.

"We'd better send a search party out for it early in the morning," said Logray.

"Poor Latara!" thought Wicket. "I have to help her now!" Without a second thought he ran off to find Baga, his pet Bordok.

Wicket saddled Baga and rode off into the night. During the summer he had often played on the far side of the forest with Latara, and he knew where the fuzzynettles grew. "I hope I can find them under all this snow," he thought.

Soon Wicket was at the edge of the dark forest. "Come on, Baga. We'll be okay," he said. Baga's hooves crunched in the snow as they entered the woods.

The forest was dark and silent. Ice and snow covered all the Ewok trails. Before long Wicket realized that they had wandered off the path that led through the forest. And try as he might, he couldn't find his way back to it.

"I think we're lost!" Wicket said to Baga. "Logray was right—I *am* headstrong and hasty!"

Then Wicket got an idea. "Maybe I can see the lights of the village from the top of that tree," he thought. He led Baga to a tall evergreen. Then he slowly climbed the icy tree until he reached a high branch. When he looked around, all he saw were the stars twinkling brightly in the dark sky above him.

"The stars!" gasped Wicket. "I can travel by them!" It was one of the first lessons he had learned as an Ewok scout.

Wicket climbed back down to the ground. "Baga!" he cried, throwing his arms around the little Bordok's neck. "We're not lost! I can find my way home now!"

Baga nickered happily.

"But first I have to find the fuzzy-nettles!" Wicket exclaimed. So he jumped on Baga's back and set off deeper into the forest.

Finally they came to the spot where Wicket hoped to find the fuzzynettles. Baga pawed at the snow with his hooves while Wicket dug with his spear. Deep under the blanket of snow he began to see the tip of a plant. He dug farther down.

"Baga! It's here!" shouted Wicket. He gathered as many of the green shoots as he could, strapped them onto Baga's saddle, and turned toward home.

Wicket and Baga returned to the village at dawn. An Ewok search party was assembling around Logray. Wicket made his way through the crowd to the medicine man.

"Not now, Wicket!" said Logray.

"But, Logray—I got the fuzzynettle plants for Latara!" Wicket protested.

"Last night I heard you say you needed them to make her medicine. So I went into the forest and I found them. Here!" He offered Logray an armful of the green shoots, still covered with snow.

Logray smiled. "Good work, Wicket!" he said.

Then he made a healing powder for Latara with the plants Wicket had gathered. As soon as he was finished, they set off for Latara's hut.

Wicket stood by the door while Logray gave Latara her medicine. Wicket was very worried about his friend. She looked so still and small in her bed.

"Wicket," said Logray after he had given Latara her medicine, "I want you to go home. You may visit Latara later, but now she needs to sleep, and so do you."

When Wicket got home, he climbed wearily into his hammock and fell fast asleep. He woke late in the afternoon. "I've got to go and see how Latara is," he said, rubbing his eyes sleepily.

"Latara! You're all right!" Wicket cried happily when he got to Latara's hut.

"Thanks to you, Wicket," said Latara. "Logray told everyone what you did for me," she added, smiling.

"You're a good and brave scout, Wicket," said Logray. "Yesterday I said you were hasty. Now I think that *I* was the hasty one. You already knew the secret of being a good medicine man."

"I did?" asked Wicket.

"A good medicine man loves the ones he takes care of," said Logray. "That is an old Ewok truth!"

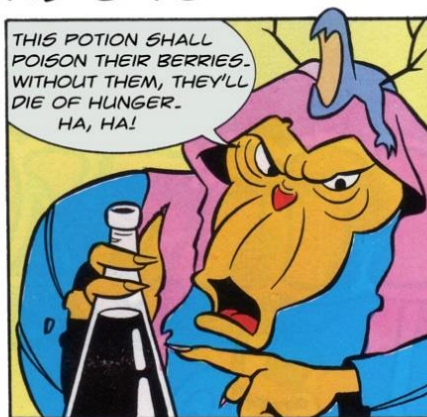
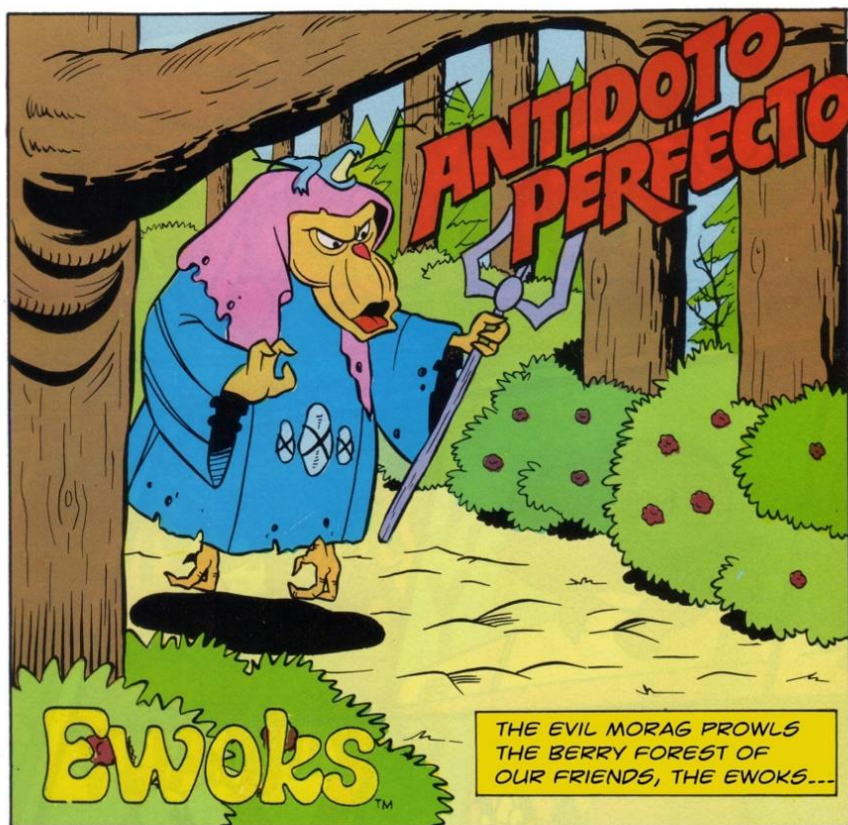
The next morning Wicket was brushing Baga when Logray appeared.

"Good morning, Wicket," said the medicine man. "Are you ready?"

"Ready for what?" asked Wicket.

"For your first day as my new apprentice," said Logray. "Now come along—I've got a lot to teach you!"

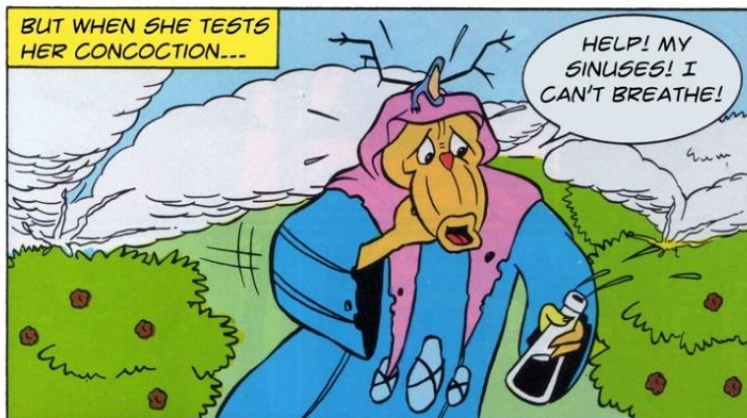
EWOKS IN PERFECT ANTIDOTE



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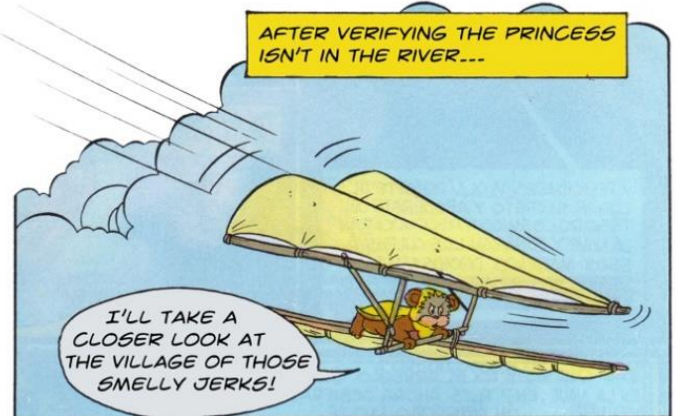
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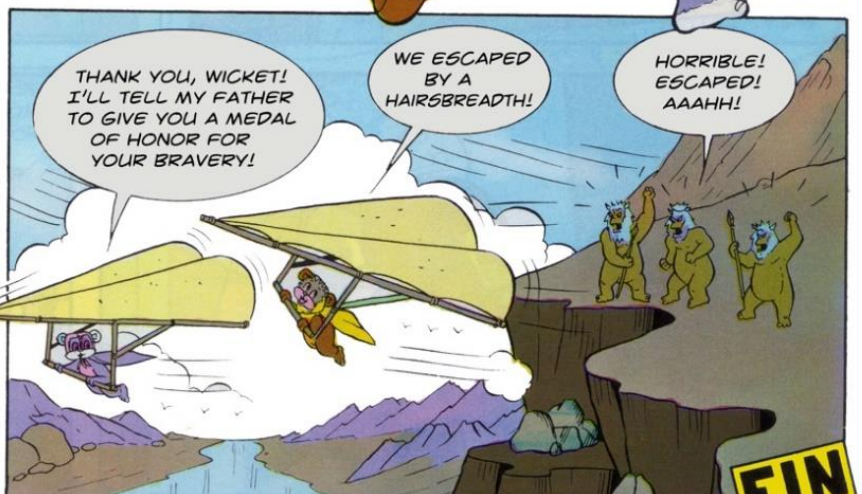
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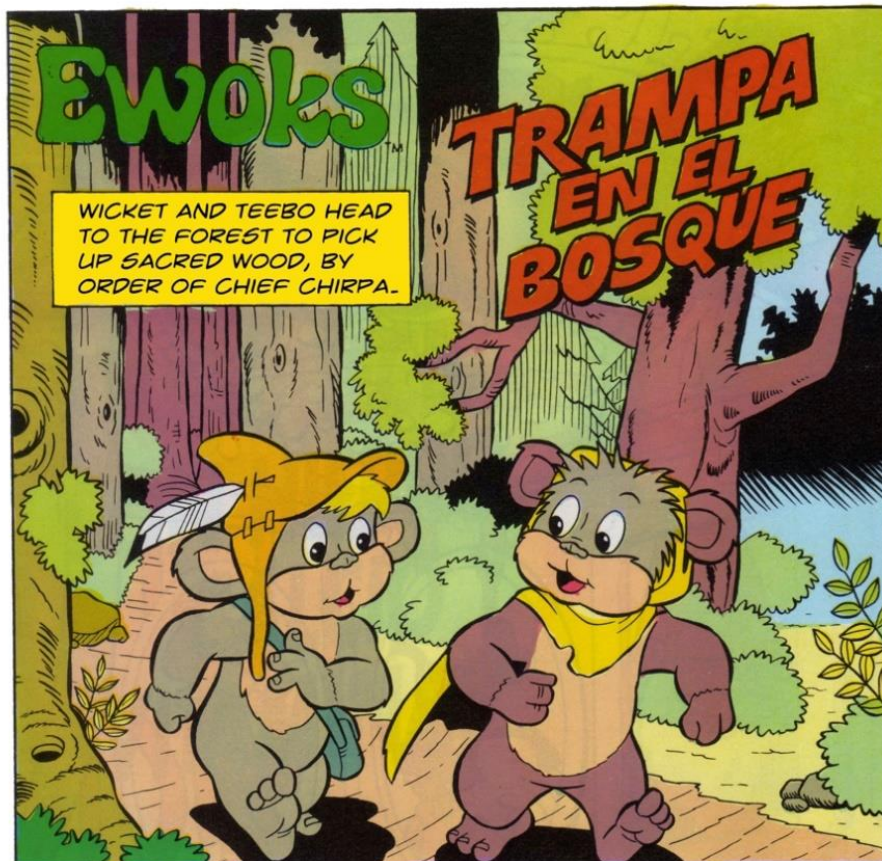
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EWOKS IN SNARE IN THE FOREST



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EWOKS IN THE BALLOON



5-1



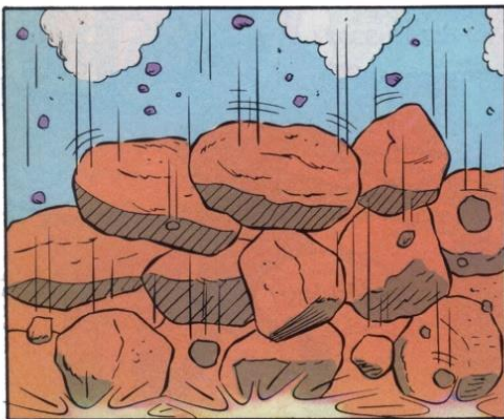
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EWOKS IN TO TRAP LATARA

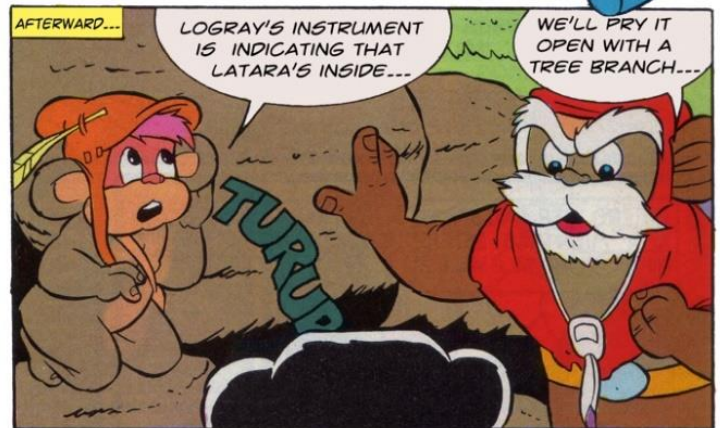


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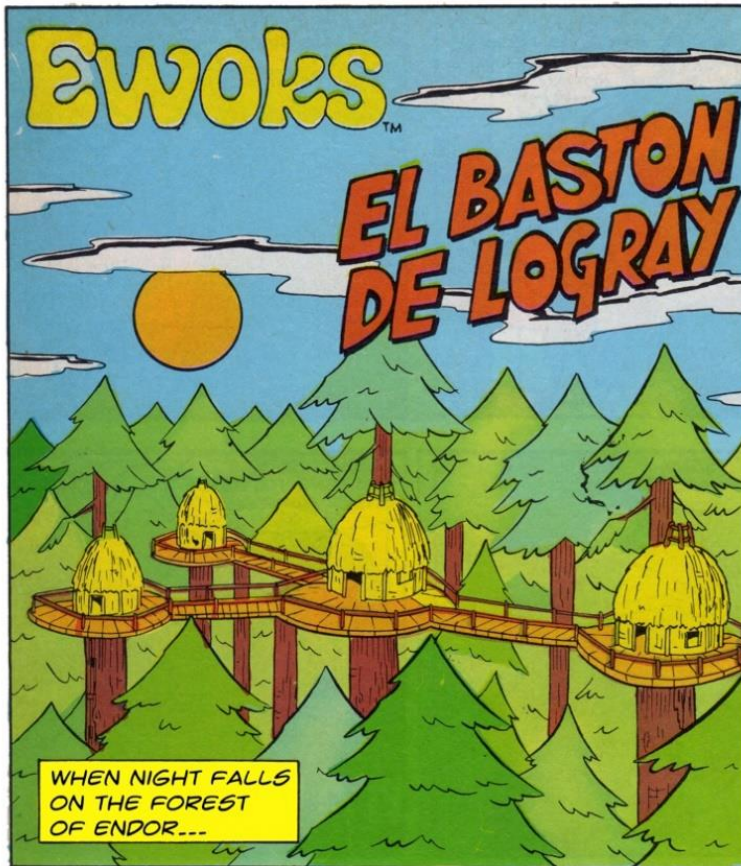
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6-2



EWOKS IN LOGRAY'S STAFF



7-1



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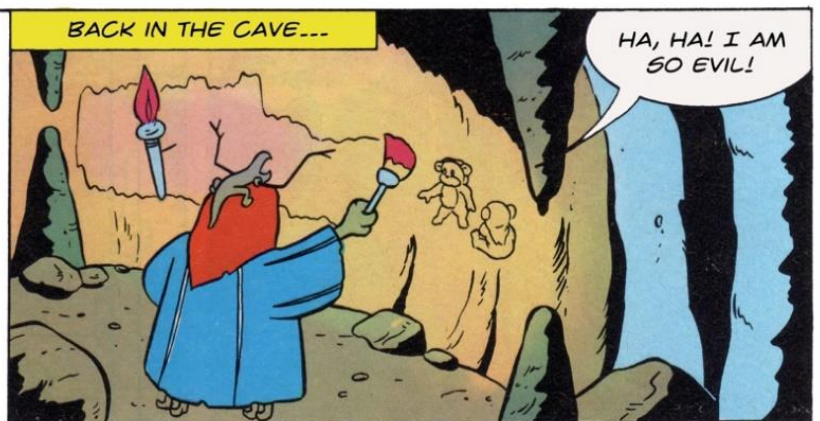
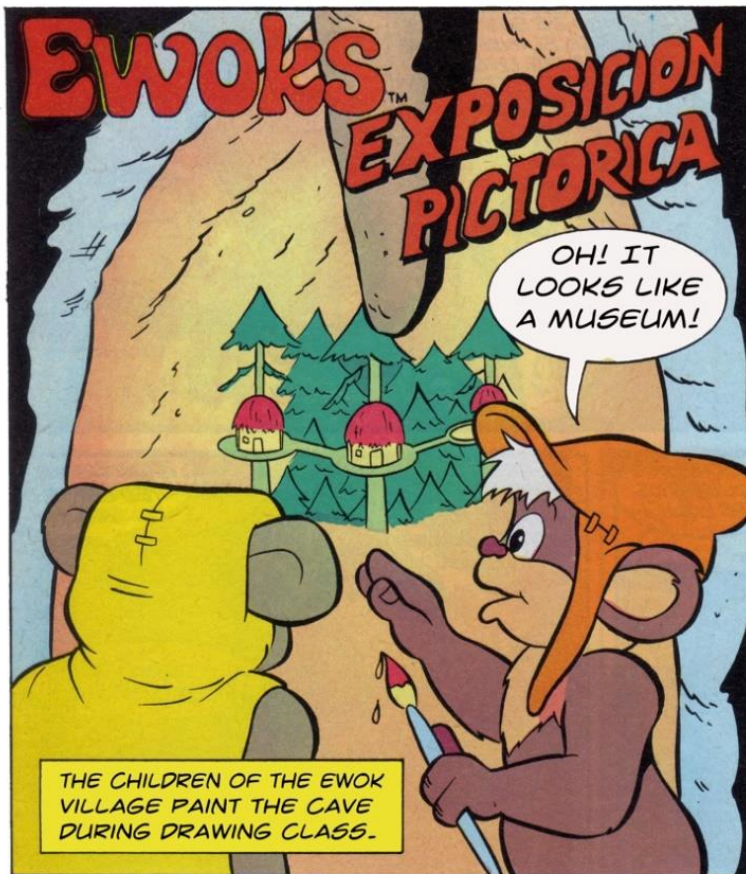
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7-2



EWOKS IN PAINTING EXPOSITION



8-1



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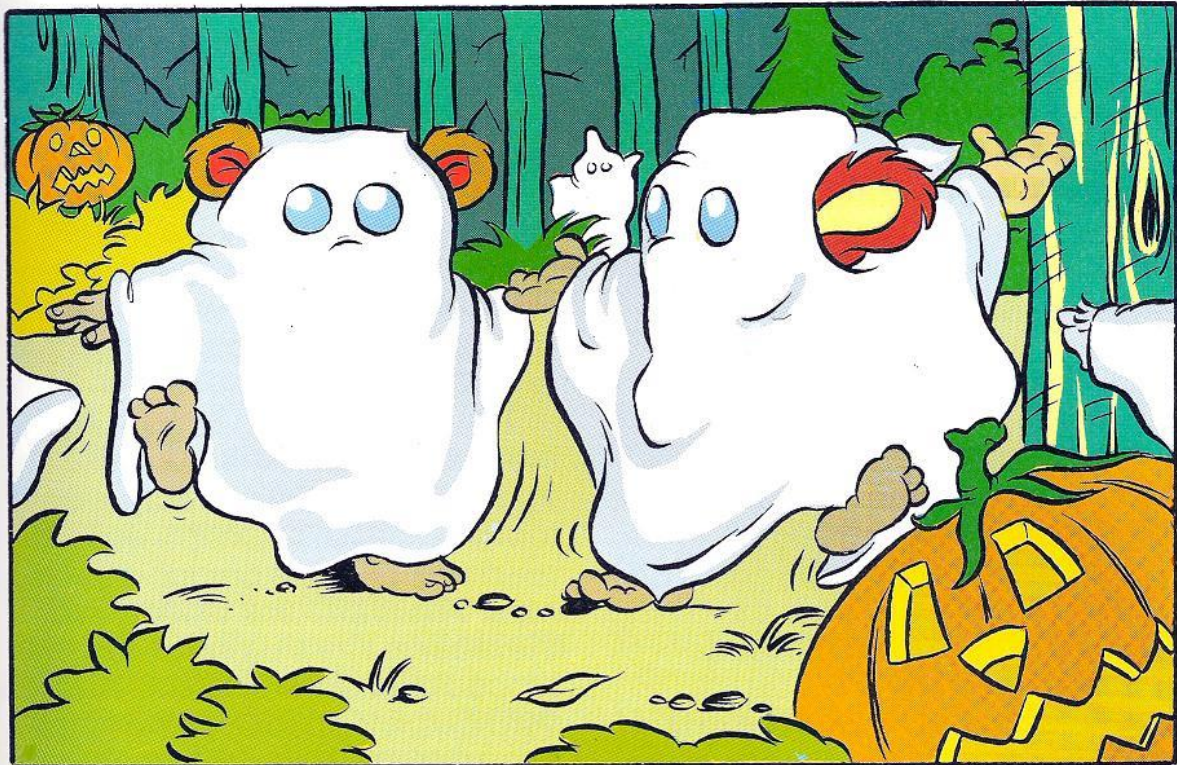
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8-2



Chief Chirpa Kidnapped!



The whole of the woodland clearing rang with the sound of laughter. All the Ewoks had dressed up as ghosts and were having a wonderful time at their annual Hallowe'en party – one of the best events of their year.

"Arroo!"

"Whazzat?" gasped Wicket, almost jumping out of his costume as a spooky spectre reared up in front of him.

"It's only me," giggled Teebo. "This party is great fun, isn't it?"

"Y-yes?" said Wicket, but he was obviously not too sure.

Just then Princess Kneesaa danced across the clearing, giggling merrily. "Look at that," she laughed, pointing to a huge, red creature standing at the edge of the clearing. "Someone's dressed up as a Hanadak."

"I wonder who it is," said Teebo.

"Danger!" cried Wicket. "That's

no fancy-dress costume. That's a real Hanadak. Look at the fangs."

Suddenly the atmosphere changed as fear spread through the village. Wicket rallied the Ewoks behind him, cried "Charge!" and the brave Ewoks ran into the attack.

With one swipe of its enormous tail, the Hanadak sent the courageous Ewoks flying. "Come on," said Wicket picking himself up. "I've got an idea."

Teebo and Kneesaa followed him across the village to where the Hanadak now stood.

"Gather as many blue dlock leaves as you can carry," he said, pointing to a tall plant heavy with large leaves.

The three Ewoks soon stripped the plant bare and then Wicket led the others right up to the Hanadak.

"Now throw them over the

beast," he ordered, and in an instant the Hanadak was covered with the foliage. The air was filled with a heady aroma for the dlock plant leaves were the most fragrant and soothing of all the plants in the forest.

Before you could say "Dangar!" a wide grin spread across the Hanadak's ugly face and it lopped off into the forest. Wicket, Teebo and Kneesaa were also grinning widely as they went back to the other Ewoks who cheered them loudly.

"On with the party," giggled Kneesaa and soon the Ewoks were enjoying themselves hugely again.

While all this had been going on, Chief Chirpa had been in the harvest store getting the food ready for the party. He was so involved in what he was doing that he had not heard the sounds of the battle that had raged. Neither had he heard a Dulok sneak into the

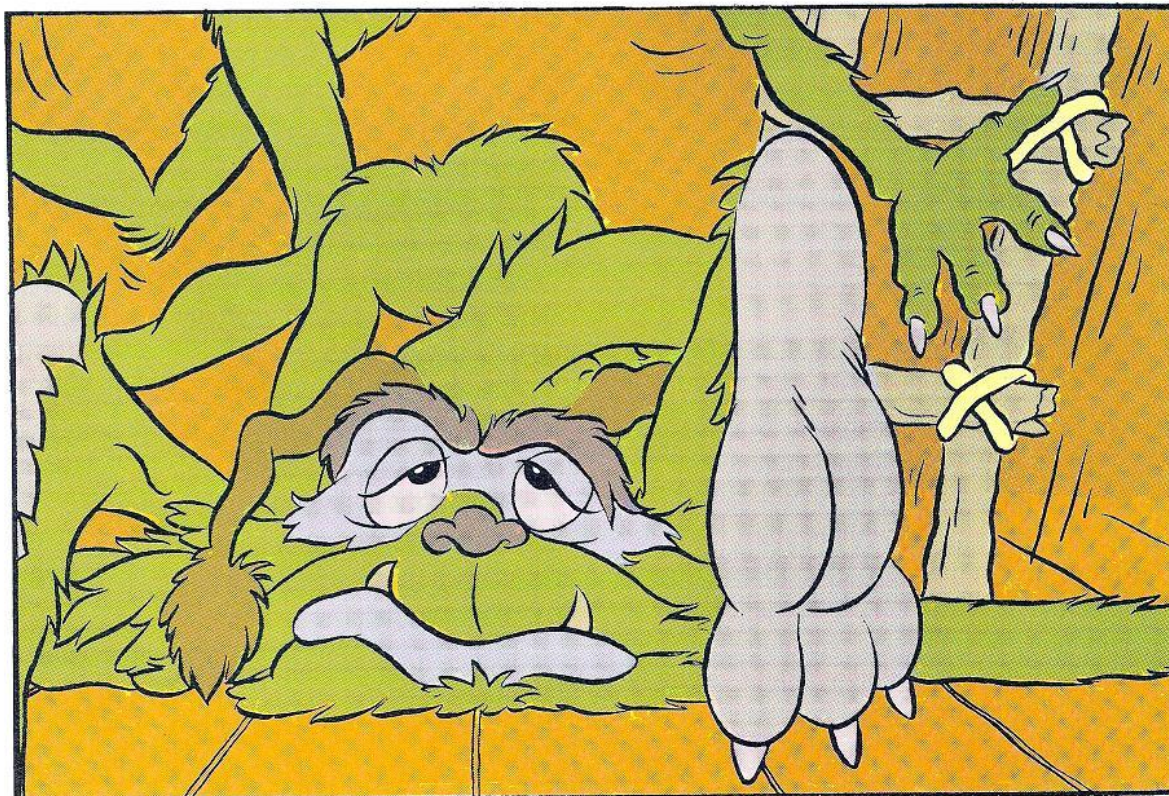
harvest store.

The Dulok and his two companions outside had known about the Hallowe'en party and had decided that, with all the Ewoks busy enjoying themselves, it would be a good time to raid the harvest store.

It was very gloomy in the store and the Dulok didn't see Chief Chirpa who was busy at his task. Thinking that the coast was clear he beckoned his two accomplices inside.

The three tip-toed deep inside the gloomy store. It was so gloomy that they didn't see the ladder on top of which Chief Chirpa was reaching for some crunch-tree nuts. The first Dulok tripped over the ladder. The second Dulok tripped over the first Dulok. And the third Dulok tripped over the other two and sent the ladder wobbling wildly as he stumbled.

Chief Chirpa tried desperately to



keep his balance and grasped hold of the corner of a heavy sack on the top shelf. But it was no good! Woosh! he flew through the air taking the sack with him. There was a loud 'plop' as he landed in a wooden box. The sack fell on top of him, covering him completely.

The dazed Duloks picked themselves up. By now their eyes were accustomed to the gloom and they could see the sack of food sitting in the box. But, of course, they couldn't see Chief Chirpa underneath it.

"Look!" said one of the Duloks gleefully. "A box of food. Let's sneak it back to our camp for our supper."

By this time the Ewoks' party was in full swing again, and no one noticed as the three Duloks, staggering under the weight of the box, skirted the clearing and headed back to their camp.

"I wish Father would bring on the food," said Princess Kneesaa. "I'm starving."

"Let's go and find him," said Teebo.

Wicket, Teebo and the princess made their way to the harvest store and peered inside.

"Can't see a thing," said Kneesaa. "Bring me a lantern."

A few minutes later, Kneesaa was holding a lantern aloft and was peering round the harvest store.

"He's not here!" she said. "And look!" She pointed to the ladder and then down to the floor.

"There's something odd. These are Duloks' footprints."

"They can't have kidnapped him, can they?" gasped Wicket in astonishment.

"What else could have happened to him?" asked Teebo.

"Let's follow the tracks," said Kneesaa.

Even as the three Ewoks were speaking, the Dulok trio had reached their camp. They placed the box in front of their chief.

"Open the sack!" he commanded.

The three Dulok raiders pulled the sack from the box and there, staring up at them was a furious Chief Chirpa.

"Take him!" roared the chief.

"Take him yourself," quivered a cowardly Dulok.

"Dolt!" said the chief, jumping on top of Chief Chirpa, pinning him inside the box. "Bring me some rope."

Chief Chirpa had almost pushed the Dulok chief from his chest by the time a huge length of rope was brought forward. But although he heaved and heaved, he was outnumbered and was soon tied up.

"Drag him to the tree and tie him to it."

A few minutes later Chief Chirpa was securely tied to a huge baccy tree. "Just wait!" roared Chirpa.





"When I'm free, I'll have you for breakfast, lunch and dinner."

The Duloks danced around their prisoner, laughing and jeering at him.

"We'll get a ransom. We'll get a ransom," they taunted him.

Chirpa roared and bellowed so loudly that even though he was tied to the tree, the Duloks fell back in fear.

"All this noise is giving me a headache!" said the Dulok chief. "Let's leave him and have something to eat."

The Duloks retreated to their tables and were soon tucking into a hearty meal. Still Chirpa roared and shouted.

"He'll give me indigestion," complained the Dulok chief. "Can't someone shut him up."

"Shut him up yourself!" said a Dulok.

"I'll shut you up," roared the chief, and soon all the Duloks were scrapping amongst themselves.

The sound of the fighting filled the forest. "Listen!" said Teebo, who, with his two friends, was still following the tracks.

"Duloks! We must be near their camp."

They followed the sounds and soon they were on the edge of the Duloks' camp. "There's Father," whispered Kneesaa. "Over there."

The Duloks were still fighting each other and didn't notice Wicket as he made his way stealthily to Chief Chirpa and cut him free.

"Aagghh!" With a mighty roar, Chief Chirpa charged into the fray,

knocking his enemies hither and thither until they were all scattered around the clearing, so dazed they were seeing stars.

"Back to our village," he said to the others, and led them through the forest to their homes.

The Ewoks were so delighted to see their chief again that, although it was very late, a great feast was prepared.

Meanwhile, back at the Duloks' camp, their chief and his men were a very sorry sight. They were bruised and bandaged.

"Thank goodness he's gone," said the chief. "I couldn't have taken much more of all that bellowing. What an old windbag. You men should count yourselves lucky at having me as your leader and not that bad-tempered old Chirpa."

"Yes," agreed a nearby Dulok. "You're much more of a pushover than he."

"Careful," said the chief. "Or else I might make a truce with the Ewoks and ask Chirpa to be our leader, too."

"You wouldn't!" gasped the Duloks in one voice. "That would be . . ."

"Unthinkable?" suggested the chief.

"Yes!" they chorused.

"In that case, we'll have no more in . . . subordiwhat's-it-called," he continued.

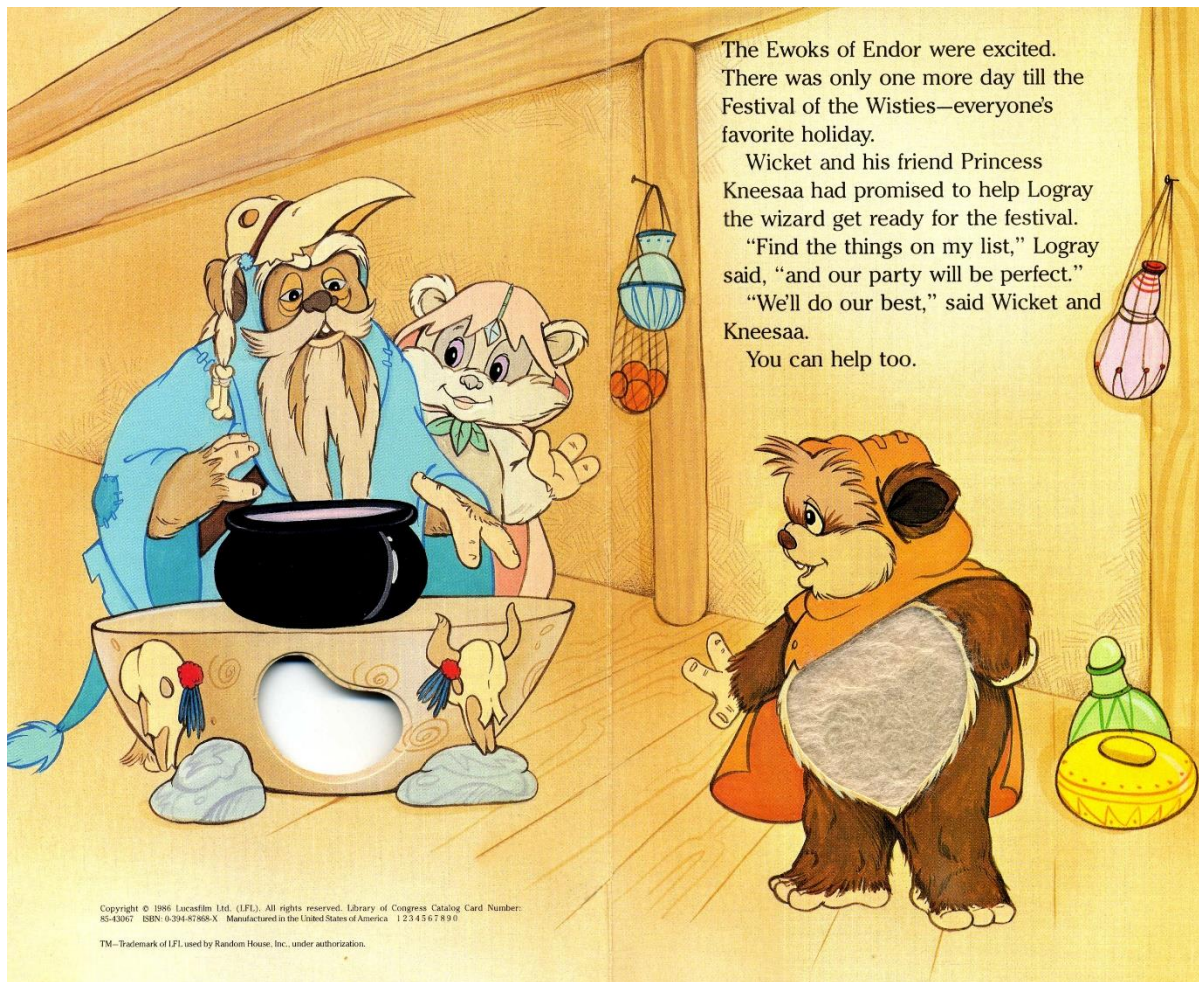
". . . ination," said the only Dulok with more than a hundredth of a brain.

"Bless you!" said the chief.

"You'd better go and see the shaman and get something for that cold."

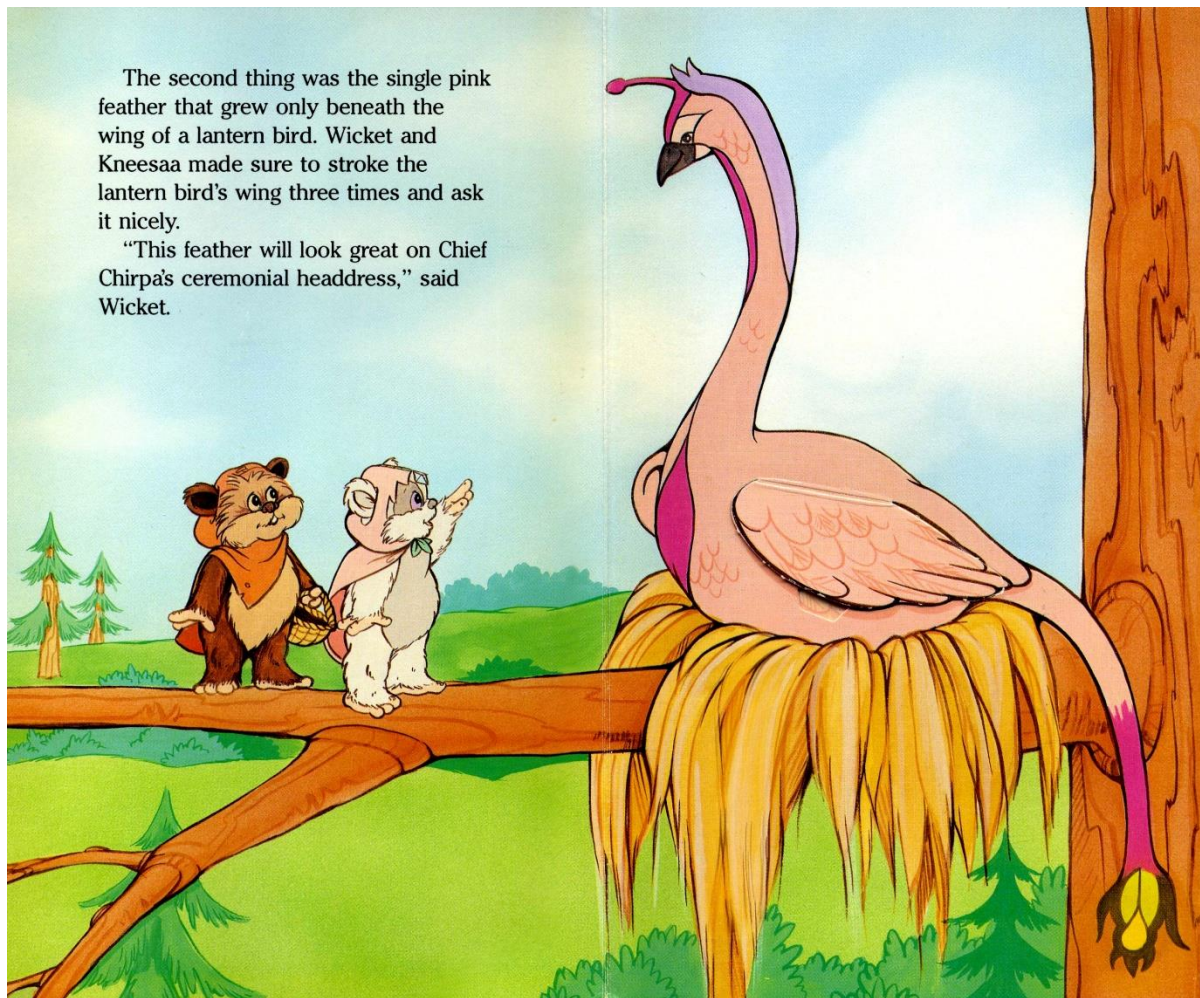


Fuzzy As An Ewok



The second thing was the single pink feather that grew only beneath the wing of a lantern bird. Wicket and Kneesaa made sure to stroke the lantern bird's wing three times and ask it nicely.

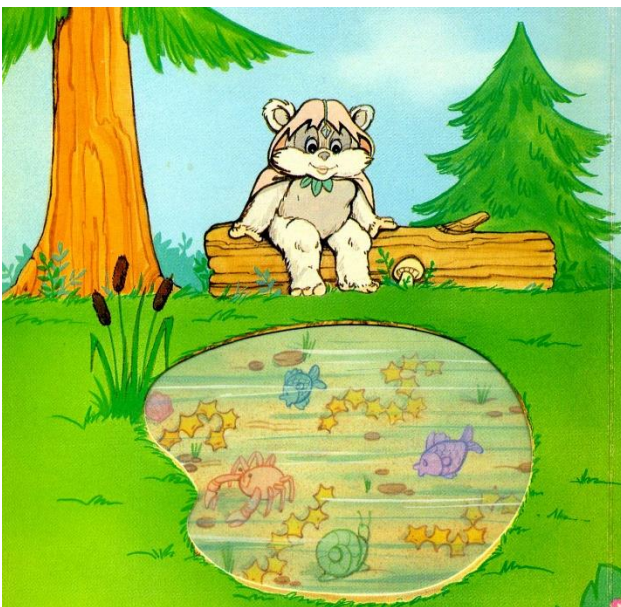
"This feather will look great on Chief Chirpa's ceremonial headdress," said Wicket.



The third thing on Logray's list was a gwanda gourd. "Those make the best rattles for the great Wistie Dance," said Kneesaa.

Can you find a nice lumpy, bumpy one?






The last thing on Logray's list was the most fun—a bushel of ripe rainbow berries for the big Wistie Fest pie.

"The only way to tell if they're ready to pick is to scratch and sniff them," said Wicket.


Can you find some ripe berries?



The next thing on the list was four starchains from the lake.

"They'll make beautiful decorations for the halls," said Kneesaa.

Can you find four starchains?



"This is the best Wistie Fest ever!" said Chief Chirpa to Logray. "Thank you, old friend."

"Thank my excellent helpers," said Logray. "I couldn't have done it without them."

And thanks for *your* help too!

Return of the Great One!

Wicket lay beside his friend on the soft grass of the forest. He yawned and said, "There's nothing like the peace and quiet of the forest in the Sun Season, eh, Teebo?"

Teebo stood up. "Except it's too hot. Come on! I'll race you to the dam. We can cool off there."

The two Ewoks sped through the forest towards the dam which was high above the village.

"Cudvarrk!" gasped Wicket, stopping to get his breath back. "Slow down!"

"Dangar!" cried Teebo, stopping suddenly, for the hard ground of the forest had suddenly become completely water-logged. There was squelchy mud where there should have been sun-baked soil.

Before Wicket could say anything there was a loud crashing sound and the air was filled with the sound of running water.

"It's the dam!" cried Wicket.

"The Duloks must have breached it. They're trying to flood us out."

"We must get back to the village as quickly as possible," gasped Teebo. "We must warn Chief Chirpa." As he spoke he ran towards a Snarl horse that was grazing nearby. "Come on, Wicket. We'll ride this beauty back."

The two Ewoks jumped on to the horse's back and galloped towards the village.

As soon as he heard what had happened, Chief Chirpa summoned Chukha-Trok, the woodsman.

"We need to build a breakwater immediately," he told the burly Ewok. "The dam's been sabotaged."

"Leave it to me," said Chukha-Trok. A few moments later there came the sound of two mighty blows of the woodsman's axe followed by a loud crashing as



Chukha-Trok felled a gigantic tree.

Not a moment too soon, it landed just in front of the gushing waters that were threatening to deluge the village.

"Veek!" gasped Teebo in relief, as the waters ran round the tree and cascaded over a cliff to create a spectacular waterfall. "Now we have time to repair the dam."

The Ewoks had lived in the forest for hundreds of years and thought that they knew everything that there was to know about it . . . but what they didn't know was that deep beneath the forest floor there was a vast, dark cavern. For thousands of years nothing had penetrated the eerie silence, but on the day the dam broke a drop of water seeped deep down through the earth and landed with a loud "plop" which echoed through the cavern. Then another . . . then another.

Suddenly another sound shuddered through the cavern. There was a loud very loud

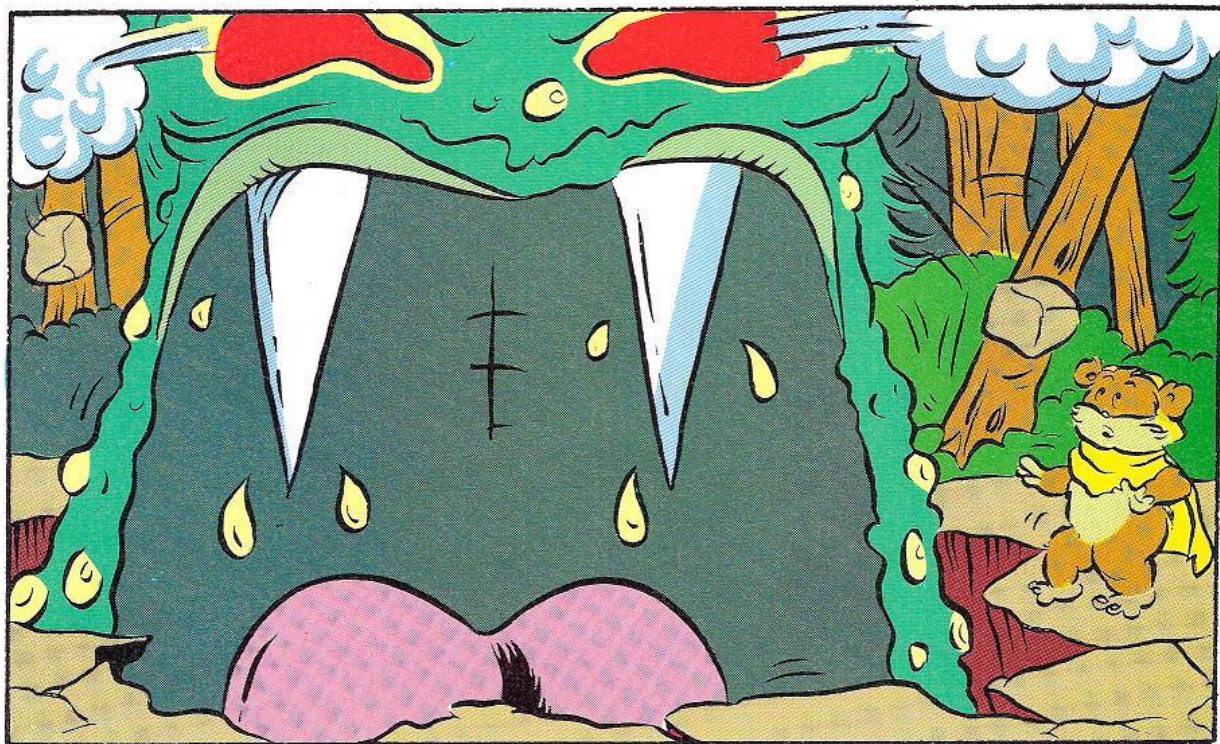
'Urrrrggggghhhhh!'; so loud was it that the cavern walls began to shake: so loud was it that far above in the forest the Ewoks trembled with fear.

"What's that?" gasped Teebo as the ground shook so violently that he had to hold on to a tree to stay on his feet.

"Kffllnnnch!" It was as if the forest had been hit by an earthquake as trees tumbled and debris was scattered all around. A huge hole appeared in the ground and the Ewoks stared in disbelief as a monstrous head appeared from it. Steam poured from the creature's awesome nostrils. Its mouth opened wide and the Ewoks were terrified by the dreadful fangs that lashed out. Each fang was as big as a fully-grown Ewok!

Chief Chirpa gasped. "I-i-i-i-t's a k-k-k-k-radak," he stammered. "One of the g-g-g-reat ones. They've been extinct for thousands of years."

Teebo hugged Wicket for comfort as the huge monster





heaved itself from the ground. With each swing of its terrible neck, a forest tree crashed to the ground.

"If it breaks our support tree, we are doomed!" cried Chief Chirpa. "Logray!" he shouted. "Do something."

Logray, the Ewoks' wise old sage, came running out of his hut. As he ran towards the chief, a branch fell from a tree and knocked him senseless. Princess Kneesaa rushed to the old Ewok's side and knelt over him. When she realized that he wasn't seriously hurt she darted into his hut. Teebo and Wicket ran after her and found her mixing a potion from the herbs and waters that Logray stored there.

"What are you doing?" asked Wicket.

"I have often watched Logray mix his potions," replied the princess. "I think I know how to deal with the monster."

Teebo looked out of the hut. The monster had now pulled itself right out of the hole in the ground and was so tall that Teebo had to crane his neck skywards to see its head.

Great jets of fire spouted from its nostrils. All around, brave Ewoks were hitting and kicking it, but the monster didn't even notice them.

"Hurry, Kneesaa!" Teebo shouted.

"Finished!" cried Princess Kneesaa, running out of the hut, clasping a large bowl of steaming green liquid. "This should calm the monster down."

In her haste, the princess didn't notice a bundle of twigs. "Oh no!" she wept as the bowl slipped from her hands, sending its contents splashing over all the Ewoks on the ground below.

One by one, the Ewoks dropped to the ground and lay motionless where they fell.

"Kneesaa, you chook," said Wicket. "You've mixed a sleeping potion. Everyone's unconscious apart from you, me and Teebo . . ."

"And the monster!" exclaimed Teebo.

A loud roar from the ferocious beast shook the leaves from the trees, covering the three friends with foliage.

"Let's get out of here," gasped Teebo.

"Don't be such a drongo," barked Wicket. "If we don't do something, our village will be destroyed."

Meanwhile Kneesaa had rushed back to Logray's hut and was busy mixing another potion. "Keep the monster busy," she shouted.

"Keep it busy?" groaned Teebo. "What does she want us to do? Play Monopoly with it?"

Just then, Princess Kneesaa came running from the hut carrying another bowl. This time the liquid inside it was yellow. "I think this should be strong enough to send the kradak to sleep . . ." and as she spoke she slipped on a damp leaf and slithered along the branch. The bowl fell from her grip and its contents poured right down the monster's back.

It let out an angry roar as the scalding liquid burned into its flesh.

"Look!" cried the princess, pointing at the kradak.

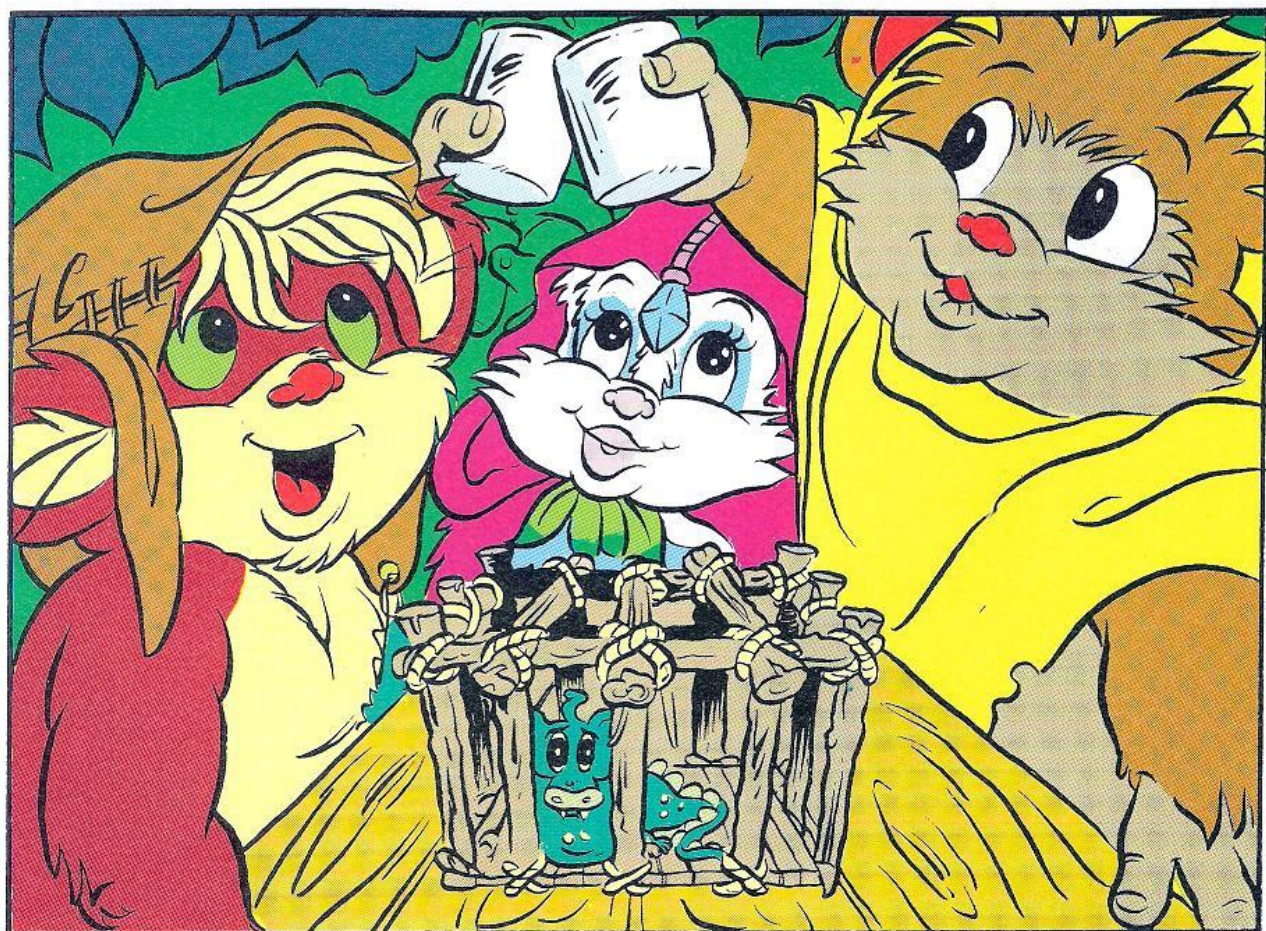
The three Ewoks watched in astonishment as the creature started to shrink. It got smaller . . . and smaller . . . and smaller, until it was no bigger than an Ewok's hand.

"Kneesaa, you're wonderful," cheered Wicket. "You mixed a shrinking potion, not a sleeping one. We're saved."

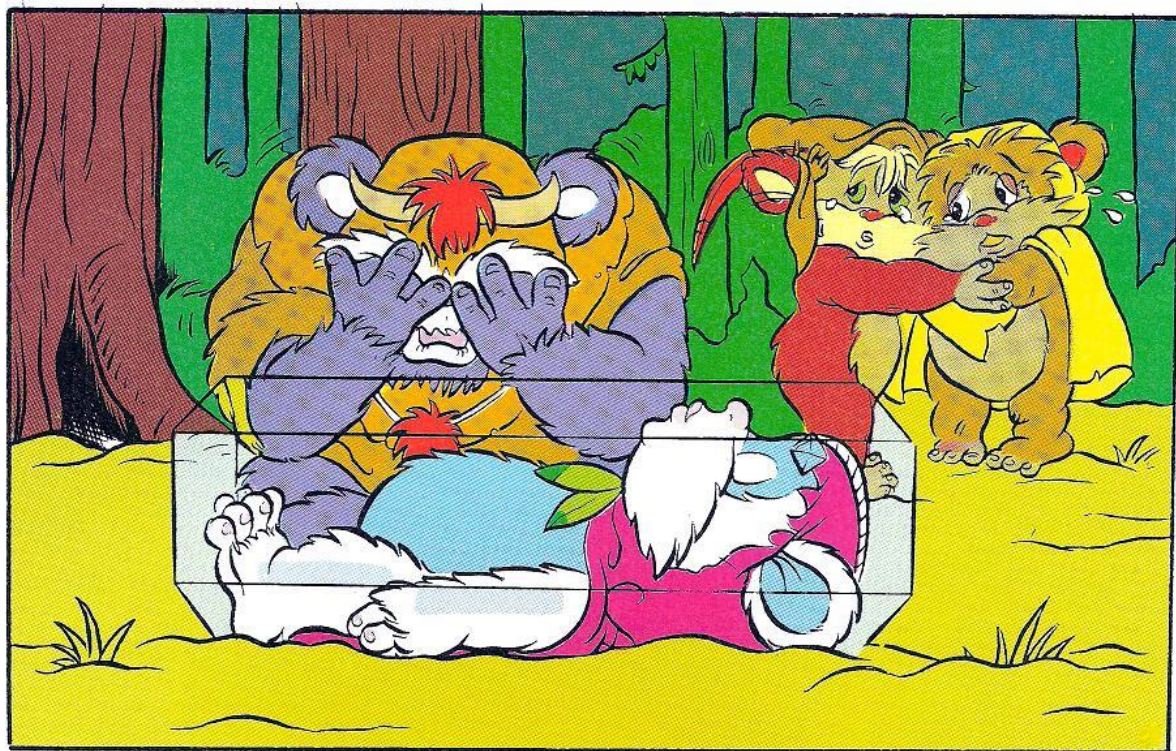
By the time the other Ewoks had come to their senses, Wicket and the princess had built a tiny cage for the little monster which was looking very sorry for itself.

"You know, Teebo," said Wicket. "If we diverted some of the water from the breakwater to the hole before we repaired the dam, we could make a super swimming pool."

"What a great idea," agreed Teebo. "But let's do it tomorrow. I've had enough for one day."



The Ice Princess!



The Season of Snow had come around again on Endor. Usually the forest rang with the laughter of the Ewoks as they played in the snow, but not this year. The Ewoks were in mourning.

When the first snows had come, Princess Kneesaa, Wicket and Teebo had been making a slide when the princess had tumbled over and had been bitten by an ice-beetle.

Wicket was broken-hearted and stood sobbing as he and Teebo looked at the beautiful princess, encased in a tomb of ice crystals. Chief Chirpa knelt by his daughter's side, his hands covering his swollen eyes.

"Is there nothing we can do?" asked Teebo.

"I don't know," said Wicket. "Master Logray is going through all his parchments. Maybe he will come up with something."

Just then the old sage approached the three mourners.

"Have you found an answer?" wept Chief Chirpa.

"There is a way," said Logray. "But it is fraught with danger. The ice-beetle's poison can only be combated by the juice of the fire plant . . ."

"But that is only found on the Mountain of Doom," wailed Chief Chirpa.

The Mountain of Doom was the home of the Frost Giants. None of the Ewoks who had set out to journey there had ever been seen again.

"Even if there was a way, I can't spare my men," said the chief. "The Duloks are hungry. They were too lazy to harvest their crops this year and already they have begun to attack our store-houses. I need all my men to fend them off."

"You must spare Teebo and

me," said Wicket bravely. "We shall go to the mountain."

"Shall we?" squeaked Teebo. "How?"

"By glider!" said Wicket bravely. "And we shall succeed."

A few days later, after an uneventful flight, Wicket and Teebo landed their glider at the base of the Mountain of Doom. It was much too high for them to contemplate flying to the top, so with ice-clamps attached to their feet to give them some grip on the smooth mountain face, they set off to scale the peak.

"Wicket," said Teebo as they struggled up the steep slope. "What's big, red, flies and eats Ewoks for dinner?"

"This is no time for jokes," snapped Wicket.

"Who's joking?" gulped Teebo, pointing to a deadly, red dragon-bird that was swooping towards them.

With a blood-curdling squawk the dragon-bird zoomed towards the two Ewoks. Teebo clutched the mountain-face for safety but the dragon-bird's wings clipped his back and knocked him off his balance.

"Yeeeeooow!" his cry filled the air as he plunged down towards the jagged rocks far below.

A few feet further down the mountain, Wicket watched in horror as his friend fell towards him. Clinging precariously to a tufty plant with one hand, he somehow managed to grab hold of Teebo's leg as he flashed by. The force almost pulled Wicket off the mountain, but he held on with grim determination as Teebo scrambled for safety.

"This makes a change," giggled Wicket nervously. "It's usually you who pulls my leg!"

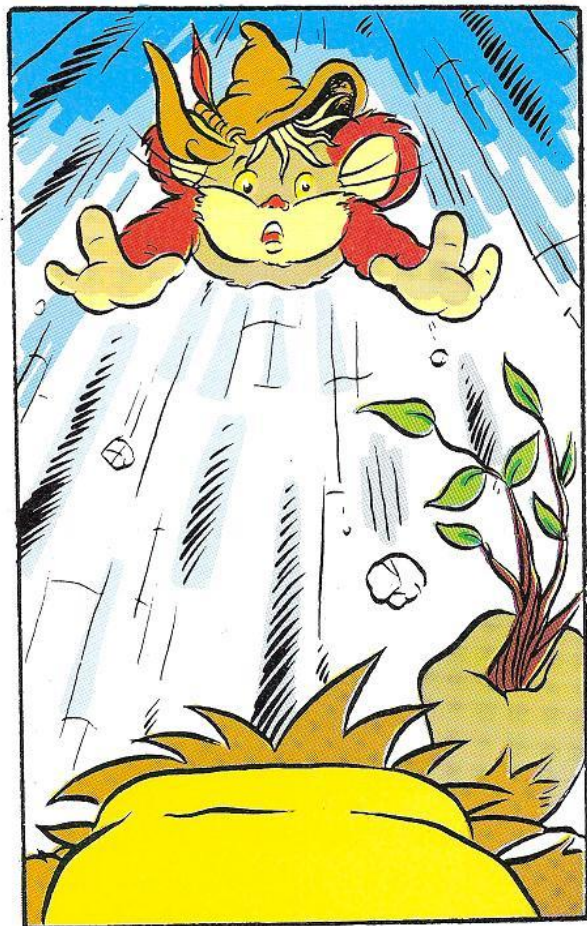
Teebo was much too shocked to think of something funny to say, and the two continued climbing in silence until they reached a ledge.

With a great whoosh of wings, the dragon-bird swooped in again. Just in time, Wicket spotted a cranny in the rock-face and he and Teebo pressed themselves into it. Imagine their surprise when they found that the cranny was, in fact, the entrance to a cave.

"Come on," said Wicket. "I'd rather face whatever's in there, than stand up to the dragon-bird."

A few minutes later, Teebo's voice echoed through a maze of tunnels. "At least if we'd stayed out there, we'd have been killed quickly. Now we're lost and will probably starve to death slowly and miserably!"

"We may as well press on," said Wicket.



It seemed to Teebo that they had been in the tunnels for hours before they turned a dark corner and stopped in amazement. For there in front of them, was an enormous cave lit by hundreds of shining crystals. At one end there was a table laden with delicious-looking food.

"At least we won't starve to death," said Teebo, scurrying towards the table.

"Come back, Teebo!" ordered Wicket. "We don't have any time to eat. We must find the fire plant and we won't find it here. That's for sure!"

"How do you know?" asked Teebo.

"Because I think this must be the throne-room of the Frost Giants' king, and Frost Giants are obviously unlikely to have the fire plant."

"Why?"

"It would melt them, silly."

"No need to be quite so hot-tempered," snapped Teebo. "All right. Let's go."

But it was too late, for as Teebo spoke a procession of Frost Giants entered the cavern, heralding the arrival of the king.

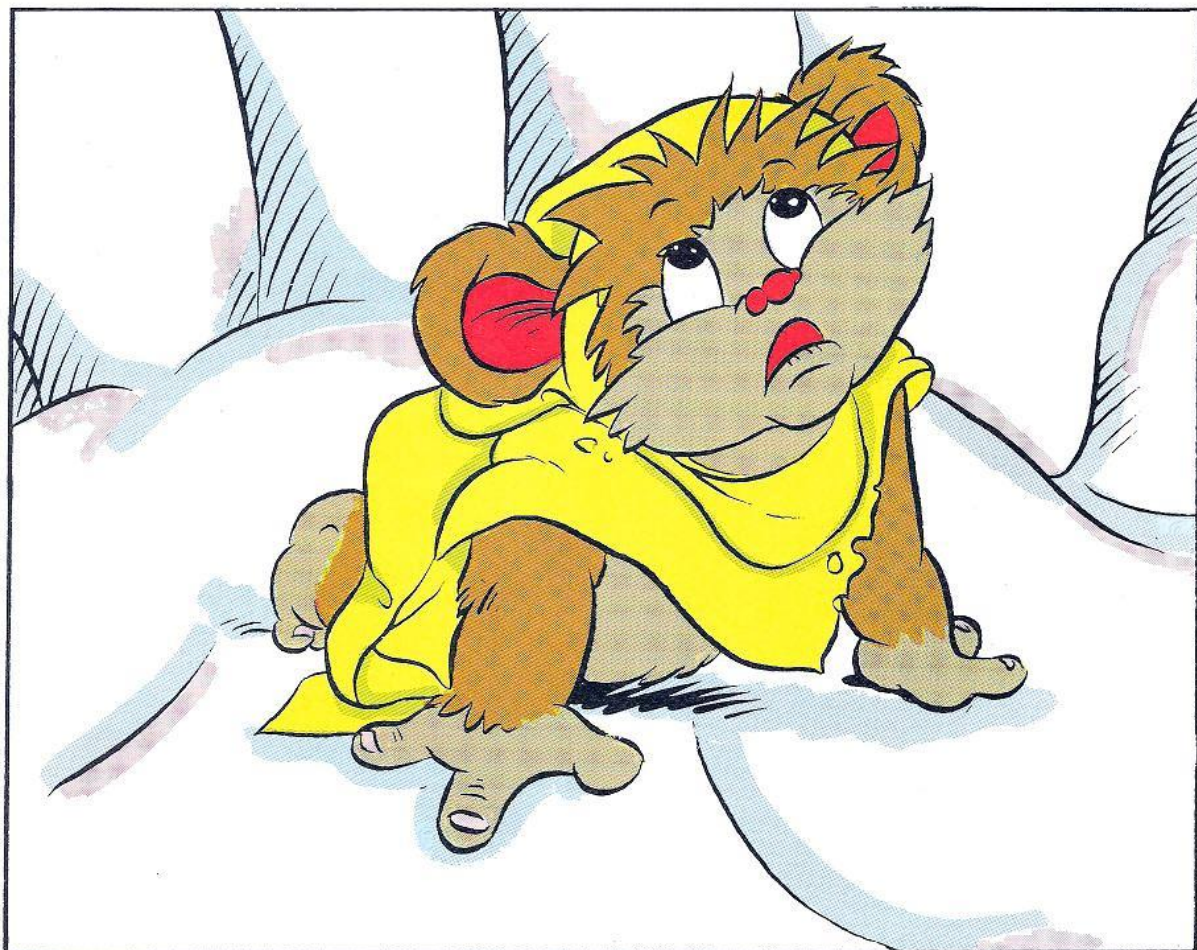
The Ewoks gulped at what they saw, for the Frost Giants were indeed gigantic, at least eight times the size of an Ewok.

"Run," cried Wicket. But before they could move Wicket and Teebo were surrounded by a circle of Frost Giants.

"Trespassers!" roared the king.

"Your Majesty," gulped Wicket, bowing low. "We did not intend to trespass. We were trying to . . ."

But before Wicket could finish, the Frost Giant king scooped him up in his icy hand.





"You are doomed," he said. "We have a special way of dealing with uninvited guests. We breathe on them."

"Oh well," said Teebo. "As long as you haven't had too much garlic, it can't be all that bad."

But Wicket had heard the legend of the Frost Giants' breath. Anyone who was touched by it was instantly turned into a block of ice.

Just as it seemed the Ewoks were doomed, two guards rushed into the throne-room. "Sire," gasped one. "The devil-bird has returned. We are being attacked."

Wicket realized that the guard was talking about the dragon-bird, and he could see that the Frost Giants were terrified: with good reason, for one puff of the dragon-bird's breath and the giants would melt.

"Sire," said Wicket. "Teebo and I will deal with it. I have a plan."

Wicket quickly put his plan into action. He ordered the giants to build a huge wall of ice on the very edge of the mountain summit. Then he asked one of them to lead him back to the entrance to the maze, which was just below the summit. He could see the fearsome bird flying nearby.

Wicket made a very rude noise at the dragon-bird which swooped down towards him. Just as it looked as if the bird would have the courageous Ewok in its grasp, Wicket shouted "Now!" and darted backwards into the tunnel. Above, on the summit, the Frost Giants pushed with all their might against the towering wall, and before you could say, "Ewok!" it cascaded down the mountain in an enormous avalanche and smashed into the ledge.

The dragon-bird squawked as it was buried beneath tons of ice, and then was heard no more.

Teebo looked down and started to sob, for he thought that his friend had died along with the dragon-bird.

"Gone!" he sobbed. "Wicket's gone!"

"Well, I think that was very successful," said a voice behind the weeping Ewok. He spun round and there, standing quite calmly, was Wicket, looking for all the world as though nothing had happened.

"How . . ." started Teebo.

"I'll explain later," said Wicket.

"Ewoks," said the Frost Giant king. "You have saved us. How can we reward you?"

"If it please Your Majesty," said Wicket. "All we want is to be shown where the fire plant grows . . ."

"We will show you, but we dare not go near it," said the king. . .

When Wicket and Teebo returned to the village with the fire plant, Logray immediately consulted his parchments and

began to mix a steaming potion. When it was bubbling furiously he poured it over Kneesaa's icy form.

All the Ewoks watched impatiently and then there was a huge sigh of relief as the ice began to melt. Soon she was free of her frozen prison and a great cheer rang out through the forest.

Chief Chirpa was so grateful that he could hardly speak. But eventually he got his tongue back and thanked his two faithful Ewoks time and time again.

"It was nothing," said Wicket modestly.

"Any time," said Teebo bravely.

"Let's go and play in the snow," said Princess Kneesaa smilingly.

A few minutes later the Ewoks were having the time of their lives as they zoomed down the snowy slopes on their sledges – apart from Wicket and Teebo. They'd had enough of snow and ice for one season!



The Haunted Village

The sun is shining brightly. High in the branches of a large tree, an Ewok guards the village. Down below, Princess Kneesaa and Wicket are searching playfully for sunberries – the sacred berries that protect Ewoks from illness. Wicket stands at the opening of a hollow log, and yells to Kneesaa, 'Here I come!'

Wicket flies out of the log and lands beside Kneesaa in a sunberry bush. 'My pouch is full of fruit. How about yours?' laughs Kneesaa. Before Wicket can reply, a huge shadow falls over the two Ewoks.

With its gigantic claws extended, a dragon-like Mantigrue dives straight for them. Wicket and Kneesaa jump out of the way. The Mantigrue uproots two sunberry trees, but unfortunately Kneesaa's foot gets caught in the roots and she is swept into the air.

'Hang on Kneesaa, I'm coming!' yells Wicket. He springs off the tree and manages to grab Kneesaa's hands, hauling her to safety. The Mantigrue flies away, taking two sunberry trees with it.

Kneesaa and Wicket rush back to the village. Chirpa and Logrey explain that the Mantigrue is the flying slave of their old enemy Morag, the Tulgah witch. 'Once in the distant past, Morag sent the Mantigrue to devour our sunberry trees. It was a time of misery.'

'We must drive the winged thief away for good,' says Chirpa. 'We cannot hurt the Mantigrue, its skin is too thick. We must use another kind of weapon,' says Logrey, producing a bar of soap. 'Soap?' cries Wicket. 'What are we supposed to do, wash it to death?'

'This soap is made from the rare shadowroot plant. It has the power to make anything it washes invisible.' Logrey went on, 'we will make the sunberry trees disappear. That should fool the stupid Mantigrue.' 'We will need everyone's help to hide the trees before the Mantigrue's return,' says Chirpa. 'But please use the soap carefully,' Logrey added. 'There is barely enough to go round.'

Quickly the Ewoks scatter, armed with tubs, brushes and ladders. Widdle, who has been engrossed in lathering up his brush, raises it suddenly and smacks Weechee in the face. Weechee's head disappears. 'You Dulock-brained Lurdo!' yells Weechee. Widdle hurls a bucket of clean water where Weechee's head had been, bringing it back again, and the Ewoks continue painting the trees.

Meanwhile, nearby in the swampy part of the forest, the cousins of the Ewoks, the evil Dulocks, are desperately trying to swat flies that swarm around their dirty hides.

'I hate this hot sun and these wretched flies.'

'Quit griping,' says the Dulock Shaman, 'and help me get the last ingredient for my magic potion.'

'If you are any kind of a wizard, you'd figure out some way to keep these bugs off us.'

Just as the argument threatens to get out of hand the Dulocks hear the sound of laughter.

Peering through the foliage, they see Ewoks playing in the river.

Kneesaa waves a bar of ordinary Ewok-soap at the Woklings, trying to give them a wash.

'Ewok-soap,' whispers Shaman, 'there's nothing like it in all Endor for driving away bugs. Let's get it.'

Unexpectedly the foliage the Dulocks are hidden in comes to life. The ground starts to bulge. The cowardly Dulocks dive off. They are staring into the gaping mouth of the swamp-monster.

'Aargh!' they scream, and run.

Groveling in front of the Dulock King Gorneesh, the Shaman is trying to excuse his cowardly behaviour.

'So,' snarls Gorneesh, 'our little tree-loving cousins don't want to share their secret soap with us. I guess we've no choice . . . BUT TO TAKE IT.'

On the other side of the forest the area that was just recently filled with sunberry trees is now empty.

'Thank you, everyone,' says Logrey. 'YOU DID A WONDERFUL JOB. Now all the sunberry trees are safely hidden from the Mantigrue.'

'What about the trees down by the river?' says Wicket.

'By the Spirit Tree,' cries Logrey. 'I'd forgotten all about them, we must paint them at once.'

As Logrey is speaking, the Dulock Shaman and his side-kick are making their way up the side of the tree that houses Logrey's hut.

Once inside the hut they rummage about looking for the soap.

Inside a clay pot they find what they are looking for. What they don't know is that it is the last bar of the Ewoks' shadowroot soap.

They quickly leave the hut and slither down the rope.

'Thank you,' Gorneesh sneers. 'I am King, so I am going to use the soap first.'

'Save some for me, My Lord,' shouts the Shaman.

Soon all the Dulocks are lathering themselves.

'Ah, this is more like it, I feel like a new Dulock,' sighs Urgah.

At this point Urgah notices something strange.

'AARGH. WHERE'S MY ARM,' he shrieks.

'This soap is bewitched,' shouts Gorneesh, and pushes the nearest disappearing Dulock into the water, who promptly reappears.

'Aha, the soap washes away. See?' says Gorneesh. 'If we can use it to become invisible we can throw a real scare into the Ewok village. Hee hee!'

The Dulocks creep up on Wicket, Kneesaa and the Woklings who are busily painting sunberry trees.

The Shaman and the other Dulocks start to hoot and cackle. The Ewoks turn and sniff the air. Wicket reaches for his spear and tells the Woklings to hide in the bushes and be quiet.

Wicket stalks the area where the cackling came from but finds nothing.

'Relax everybody', he calls, 'there's no-one there.'

But suddenly something removes a basket of fruit from Zephee's hands.

An Ewok is sitting at a potter's wheel, when the bowl he is working on is destroyed.

Another Ewok carrying a pail of water, is spun around by an invisible Dulock. The water flies all over the Dulock who starts to appear.

Havoc quickly breaks out in the village. Smashed pottery and spilled food is everywhere.

Logrey is examining tracks in the mud.

'Dulock tracks,' he shouts, 'they must have been the ones who stole my last bar of shadowroot soap.'

'Uh-oh, we used up ours before we could hide all the trees,' says Wicket.

'If the Mantigrue sees even one sunberry tree . . . it will rampage through the forest until it destroys the rest,' says Logrey.

'And what's worse,' cries DeeJ, 'now the Dulocks can become invisible and attack us anytime.'

'Since when did the Dulocks care about soap? They smell awful . . . all those bugs.'

'Wait,' says Logrey, 'that's it, they must have thought they were getting the soap that keeps our fur clean. Right, gather all the bugs you can. We're going to teach the Dulocks a lesson . . . thieves never prosper.'

The Ewoks sneak up to the camp fire around which the Dulocks are celebrating.

'Wicket, you are the only one small enough to sneak in and get the soap,' whispers Chirpa.

'Don't forget to leave this.' Logrey hands Wicket a soap bar almost identical to the magic soap.

Wicket sneaks up behind Gorneesh's throne, but Gorneesh spots him.

'Ewok!' roars Gorneesh. 'Get him.'

But Wicket runs off with the magic soap remembering to drop the trick soap in its place.

Satisfied that they have still got the soap, the Dulocks quickly give up the chase and there and then decide to lather up. The Ewoks watch and then release the bugs they have collected. Imagine the Dulocks' surprise when, instead of disappearing, they are covered from ugly head to smelly toe in millions of bugs.

That takes care of them!

Unfortunately, in all the rushing about, Wicket has dropped the magic soap in a puddle, so they are back to square one.

But he has an idea. He fills a sack with the soapy water and makes holes in it and swings Tarzan-style over the remaining sunberry trees.

As the last of the bushes vanish, the Mantigrue swoops down. Wicket has no time to hide and the Mantigrue is getting closer. Just in time Wicket slips behind a sunberry tree.

The slow-witted Mantigrue is fooled. He flies up and around but soon gives up and flies away.

Wicket sticks his head out from the invisible bushes and a great cheer goes up.

'In honour of Wicket's cleverness and courage, this day will be a holiday,' proclaims Chirpa.

'There's just one thing I have to know,' says Wicket. 'Do invisible sunberries taste as good as regular ones . . . ?'

Mmmm, they do.

Wicket And The Dandelion Warriors

Far, far away upon a distant planet called Endor lived a furry race of creatures known as Ewoks. They were small in size, but their hearts were big. They loved one another and tried hard to be kind to all the other dwellers in the giant forest of Endor.

The Ewoks built their huts high up in the branches of ancient, towering trees. There the children played together, and the grownups went about their daily tasks. When all the Ewoks were gathered together in the evening's firelight, they would tell stories and sing songs about the magic of the forest. The forest not only sheltered them, but it fed them as well—with all the plants and nuts and fruits these gentle creatures loved to eat.

They especially loved the delicious, juicy berries of the blumfruit.

It was a warm and sunny morning in springtime when young Wicket the Ewok went down to the forest floor to help his father, Deej, pick some blumfruit. Wicket's friend Princess Kneesaa went along too. She knew where the ripest berries were to be found.

"Here we are!" she shouted. "A whole patch of good ones!"

Wicket threw a berry at Kneesaa, and it splattered gooiily. "You're right." He giggled. "Good and juicy."

"Not funny!" said Kneesaa, flinging one back at Wicket.

Wicket looked about him, searching for the biggest, ripest berry he

could find to throw. But when he looked on the ground behind him, he gave a startled yelp. The ground seemed to be moving! Looking more closely, he saw thousands of antlike creatures, eating up everything in their path.

He backed away from the ants, but suddenly the ground slid away from under his feet. "Eeeyow!" he cried, tumbling backward onto the river of moving ants. At first he worried about crushing them. But he didn't think about that for long. *He* was the one in danger! The powerful little creatures were carrying him toward their hole in the ground. Wicket was going to be their dinner!

"Help!" he shouted as his head went in. "Get me ou—!"

Deej heard Wicket's cries. "Hold on, son!" he cried. Kneesaa was already there, desperately tugging at Wicket's legs. But half of Wicket had already disappeared.

"Quick!" Deej told her. "Pull together with me. One, two . . . three!"

They gave a mighty yank. Wicket's head came bursting out of the hole, and Deej and Kneesaa went flying backward. With a dull thud, Deej fell against a tree. For a moment his eyes widened as if in pain.

Wicket sprang to his feet and raced over. "Dad! Dad—are you all right?"

But Deej was not all right. "Beecha! Beecha! Berries . . . Stay away!" he cried in a strange voice, his eyes rolling in his head. And he seemed to have no idea where he was, or even who Wicket and Kneesaa were.

"Look! On that tree!" said Princess Kneesaa. Her sharp eyes had spotted an ugly bluish growth on the bark of the tree behind Deej. Its tip was covered with Ewok blood. She pointed to Deej's shoulder.

"He's been cut!" she cried.

Deej was still babbling when the children carried him back to the village and up the winding staircase to his tree hut. Wicket's older brothers, Weechee and Willy, helped lay him down on a bed. Shodu, their mother, began preparing strong forest medicines. While Wicket told everyone what had happened, Shodu tended to her husband.

"It's not working," she said after a while. "I've never seen him like this before. He doesn't even recognize us!"

"I'll go get Master Logray right away!" cried Wicket.

But Weechee stopped him. "No, you don't, little brother. You've caused enough trouble already. Dad hurt himself trying to save you. Anyway, you'd probably only get lost!"

"Whoever goes, go now!" cried Shodu. "Your father is changing!" It was true. The color of Deej's fur had begun to turn from gray to white, and his skin was wrinkling up. He appeared to be growing older by the second!

Wicket fought back his tears. "Weechee is right," he told himself. "It's all my fault." His head dropped in shame and sorrow as his brothers ran out.

Logray the Wise was standing before a steaming cauldron when Weechee and Willy burst into his hut. Interruptions like this always made him cross. "Well, what is it?" he snapped, stirring his magic brew.

Willy would eat anything, anytime. His eyes grew wide at the sight of the fizzing, bubbling contents of the cauldron. But Weechee didn't notice Willy edging toward it. He was much too intent on telling Logray what had happened to their father. As Weechee spoke, the wizard grew very grave. "Deej must have cut himself on the fungus of the Rokna tree," he muttered. "I must go to him before it's too late."

Just then there was a loud slurping noise. "Oh, no!" cried Weechee. Willy was actually drinking down the liquid in the pot!

"Be careful! That's dangerous!" shouted Logray.

But Willy was very pleased with this new taste sensation. Pleased, that is, until he grew even larger, rose like a balloon, and then hit the ceiling with a thump.

"It will wear off eventually," said the wizard. "Meanwhile, we must go. There is no time to lose." They loaded Willy down with weights, tied a rope around his middle, and led him out of the hut. As they all rushed to Deej's hut, Willy bounced along behind them like a furry balloon.

As soon as they arrived, Logray examined DeeJ. By now Wicket's father looked even older than the ancient wizard himself. And the aging was still going on!

"Can you save my husband?" Shodu asked desperately.

Logray grew even graver. "There is a cure," he said. "But its ingredients are rare—and sometimes dangerous to gather."

"Tell me where they are! Oh, please tell me!" little Wicket pleaded. He wanted so badly to help his father.

"There are three things that I must have," said Logray. "First, the tail feather of a giant lantern bird."

"What else?" Wicket cried hurriedly.

"A frosch egg. The frosch are unpleasant. And they do not give up their eggs easily."

"I don't care—I'll do it. What's the third ingredient?"

"A star-shaped quill from one of the dandelion warriors."

"I'll get them all!" Wicket promised, and started to turn away.

But Weechee stopped him. "Forget it, small fry," he said. "I'm the one who's going!"

"You are wasting time," Logray said impatiently. He picked up an hourglass and turned it over. "When the sands inside run to the bottom, your father's time to live will end. If there is to be any hope at all, you brothers must work together."

"All right!" said Weechee. "Let's do it like this. Willy, you go after the tail feather, since that's the easiest. I'll find the frosch egg. That's the most dangerous. You, Wicket, round up the dandelion quill. We'll meet back here as soon as we can. Let's go!"

Down, down, down the winding staircase Wicket and Weechee ran. They split up as soon as they reached the ground. Bouncing along behind them, Willy reached the bottom after his brothers were gone. But he had the shortest distance to go, and he soon found what he was looking for. The lantern bird's large nest was easy to spot from the ground. But getting all the way up to the very high branch on which it rested was something else again. Willy had never been much of a climber, and he knew this was no time to learn.

But then it dawned on him that he was a different Willy now, thanks to Logray's potion. In fact, he was lighter than air! All he had to do was throw off the weights that were keeping him on the ground, and float up! Smiling, he rose into the sky, passing branch after branch on his way.

When he reached the nest, he climbed into it carefully. There on a mound of unhatched eggs was a big, beautiful lantern bird's tail feather. He was just picking it up when a shadow passed between him and the sun. By the time Willy saw what was happening it was too late. The giant mother lantern bird settled peacefully down onto her nest—and right on top of Willy!

Not far away Weechee was looking for frosch. He didn't know much about them—just that he had to go into the swamps to find them. He tried to run through the deep, sticky mud, but his legs grew tired from the effort, and he was soon panting for breath in the dank air. Luckily it was not long before he heard the waterfall near the place where the scaly, slithery lizards were said to live.

Brave as he was, Weechee felt a stab of fear. *Everybody* was scared of the frosch. With their sharp teeth and snapping jaws they could devour anything, no matter how large, in seconds. Hiding among the reeds, Weechee studied the deep, oozy pond that was the frosch's home.

Suddenly two of the wriggling beasts appeared and slid into the pond. They had come, Weechee noticed, from a group of rocks behind the waterfall. Perhaps that was where he would have to go to find a frosch egg.

Weechee inched his way along the ledge that ran behind the waterfall and found the entrance to a cave. His teeth chattering from fear, he moved inside. Was this where the frosch laid their eggs? Then he spied a deep cut in the rock wall. He reached into it, and his hand touched something cold and slippery. He pulled it out. It was a mound of frosch eggs, all stuck together!

Weechee knew he had to work quickly. He had just managed to free one of the eggs when a piercing scream echoed through the cavern.

He'd been seen! From everywhere at once the hideous frosch came at him. Weechee leaped over two of them and rushed into a narrow tunnel. It led him higher and deeper into the cave. For a moment he stopped. Where was he? Weechee had no idea. Suddenly more frosch came darting out at him, their jaws gaping wide. As the lizards slithered closer Weechee heard another sound in the deep darkness of the cavern—the roaring of a wild underground stream. Would it carry him outside to the plunging waterfall?

Weechee ran to the stream, said a quick prayer, and leaped blindly into the foaming water.

In another part of the forest, Wicket searched for a meadow where dandelions might be growing. At long last he found them, scattered among the high grass. With their tall, thin stems and big fluffy tops, they were so pretty it was hard to believe they were dangerous. But each one of their thousands of pointy petals was sharp as a needle. These must be their quills. With a little luck he'd surely find at least *one* quill that was star-shaped.

He was just about to look when a frightened, squeaky voice cried out. "Help! Help! Over here!"

"Over where?" asked Wicket, squinting in the sunlight.

"I may be small," yelled the voice, "but not *that* small!"

Turning in the direction of the sound, Wicket finally saw who had called. It was a tiny, elflike gnome who had been tied with a rope to the only tree in the meadow.

"Cut me loose, please!" he pleaded. "Hurry!"

But the young Ewok held back. "There might be a very good reason why someone has tied this strange-looking fellow up," he thought.

"Hey!" said the prisoner, who must have guessed what Wicket was thinking. "You don't have to be a bad guy to have the dandelion warriors use you for target practice! I'm just a Gupin, and I've wandered into their territory by mistake!"

Wicket took another look at the tree. Stuck into the bark all around the Gupin were . . . dandelion quills!

"Hurry, please! They're heading this way again!" cried the little Gupin.

"But dandelions can't move," Wicket thought. "They're only *plants*."

Just then a flying quill went zinging past his head and struck the tree. Wicket spun around. The dandelion warriors were slowly coming closer. Those gnarled, spindly roots were really *feet*! Before Wicket's amazed eyes one of the warriors stopped, lowered its head to take aim—and fired off a barrage of deadly quills.

With a slash of his knife, Wicket cut the Gupin's bonds. He ducked as a quill whistled over his head. "I think we'd better—"

"—get out of here!" agreed the Gupin. They dived into the high grass.

When they arrived back at the tree house where Wicket lived, the Gupin grew shy. "Too many grownups inside," he said, glancing through the door. "I'll watch from out here."

Wicket rushed in alone. "I've got it. Look! Here it is!" he shouted, waving the quill. But when he looked around the room, the joy faded from his face. There were many Ewoks watching over DeeJ and all of them were sad. His mother was weeping. Logray shook his head mournfully. There was very little sand left in the top of the hourglass, and Wicket's two brothers were nowhere in sight!

"I'll go find them!" cried Wicket. "I'm taking this with me!" He snatched up the hourglass and started off alone, but Princess Kneesaa caught up to him outside. With her was their friend Teebo.

"We're coming too," said Kneesaa. "Teebo can ask the trees for help!" Teebo was a young Ewok with a special gift. He knew how to talk to the trees in the forest.

They raced down the stairway to the forest floor, but Kneesaa and Teebo stopped in amazement when they saw the tiny gnome. "Who—uh—what are you?" said Kneesaa.

"He's a Gupin," explained Wicket. "He helped me get the dandelion quill. He was really brave."

"What a neat little guy!" said Teebo.

Wicket held up the emptying hourglass. "We've got to hurry!" he said.

But Teebo held up his hand for silence. It was time to listen to the songs of the forest. He moved away from his friends, stood silently until all was quiet within himself, and then raised his head to the wind and listened while the trees spoke to him.

“Willy went this way!” he said at last.

They all rushed off and didn’t stop to catch their breath until they came to the foot of the tree where Willy had dropped the weights that kept him from floating.

“Where *is* he?” Wicket asked anxiously.

The big tree rustled in the breeze. “We’ve got to get to that nest!” said Teebo.

Up they climbed, until they drew near the branch that held the nest. “Let’s not get too close,” whispered Teebo. The lantern bird, sitting on her eggs to keep them safe, was looking at her visitors very suspiciously.

“Good day,” said Teebo, who also knew the language of birds. “Can you tell us please if you’ve seen a lost Ewok?”

The bird squawked and shook her head. She certainly had not.

Just then, Teebo thought he heard a peculiar sound coming from under the lantern bird. “You know,” he said, “I think I hear one of your eggs hatching.”

The proud mother lifted herself up—and out scrambled Willy! “See,” he said, clasping the ruffled feather, “I got it!”

“*That*,” an indignant squawk told Teebo, “is no child of mine! What’s more,” she scolded, “that’s *my* feather. Hands off!”

“Madam;” Teebo pleaded, “we need it for medicine, so that Wicket’s father won’t die.”

A puzzled look crossed the bird’s face. She cocked her head.

“It’s for some medicine that our wizard makes,” Teebo started to explain. “He mixes a lot of . . .”

But the bird had lost interest. With a little ruffle of her feathers she turned her attention elsewhere.

“Thank you for the feather,” Wicket said sincerely, but the lantern bird simply turned up her beak.

“We’d better hurry,” the Gupin reminded them all.

Everyone began to climb down the tree—except Willy, that is. “All I have to do,” he said, “is *float* down.” He took one big step into the air—and fell like a stone! The magic potion had just worn off.

Wicket looked at the hourglass he’d taken from the hut. “There’s practically no time left,” he said. “Let’s get to the frosch grotto!”

Teebo knew a shortcut, but still it was a long run. At last they arrived at the deep pond. “Hey!” cried Weechee from somewhere above them. “It’s about time someone got here!”

He was hanging from a jutting tree—right over the waterfall! It took more precious time to pull him to safety, and again Wicket looked at the hourglass. The last grains of sand were moving toward the bottom. “It’s all over,” he said despairingly. “We’ll never get back in time. It’s just too far to go.”

“Not if we fly,” said the Gupin with a little smile. “Now, all of you concentrate. Think about a large flying creature.”

“Why?” Wicket asked.

“Just do it, please. And don’t mess it up with any disbelieving thoughts!”

The five young Ewoks did as they were asked. Then, before their astonished eyes, the tiny Gupin started to stretch and change—and turned into a great bird! “Hop on!” he squawked.

Moments later the door of Deej’s hut burst open. In rushed the Ewok children with the feather and the egg. “We’re here!” shouted Wicket. “And we’ve got all the ingredients for the medicine now!”

But everyone in the hut looked very grave. “I’m afraid there isn’t much hope,” Logray said sadly.

“No! There’s got to be time left!” cried Shodu. “Give Logray the ingredients!”

Logray wasted no more time with words. He threw the ingredients into the new brew he was boiling in a pot and began to chant. Then he sprinkled the mixture over Deej.

Very slowly at first, then faster and faster, Wicket’s father began to

grow younger. His wrinkles disappeared. The color came back to his fur. And before long he was once again the father that Wicket knew.

“How long have I been asleep?” he asked as his eyes fluttered open. “And what am I doing here?”

Shodu threw herself into his arms. “Oh, Deej!” she cried. “You’re back!”

“Back? Back from where?”

“Well, that’s a long story,” she said with a sigh. “But I want you to know that you have three wonderful sons.”

“Well, maybe we are,” said Weechee. He put his arm around his younger brother. “But I think the hero of the day is Wicket.”

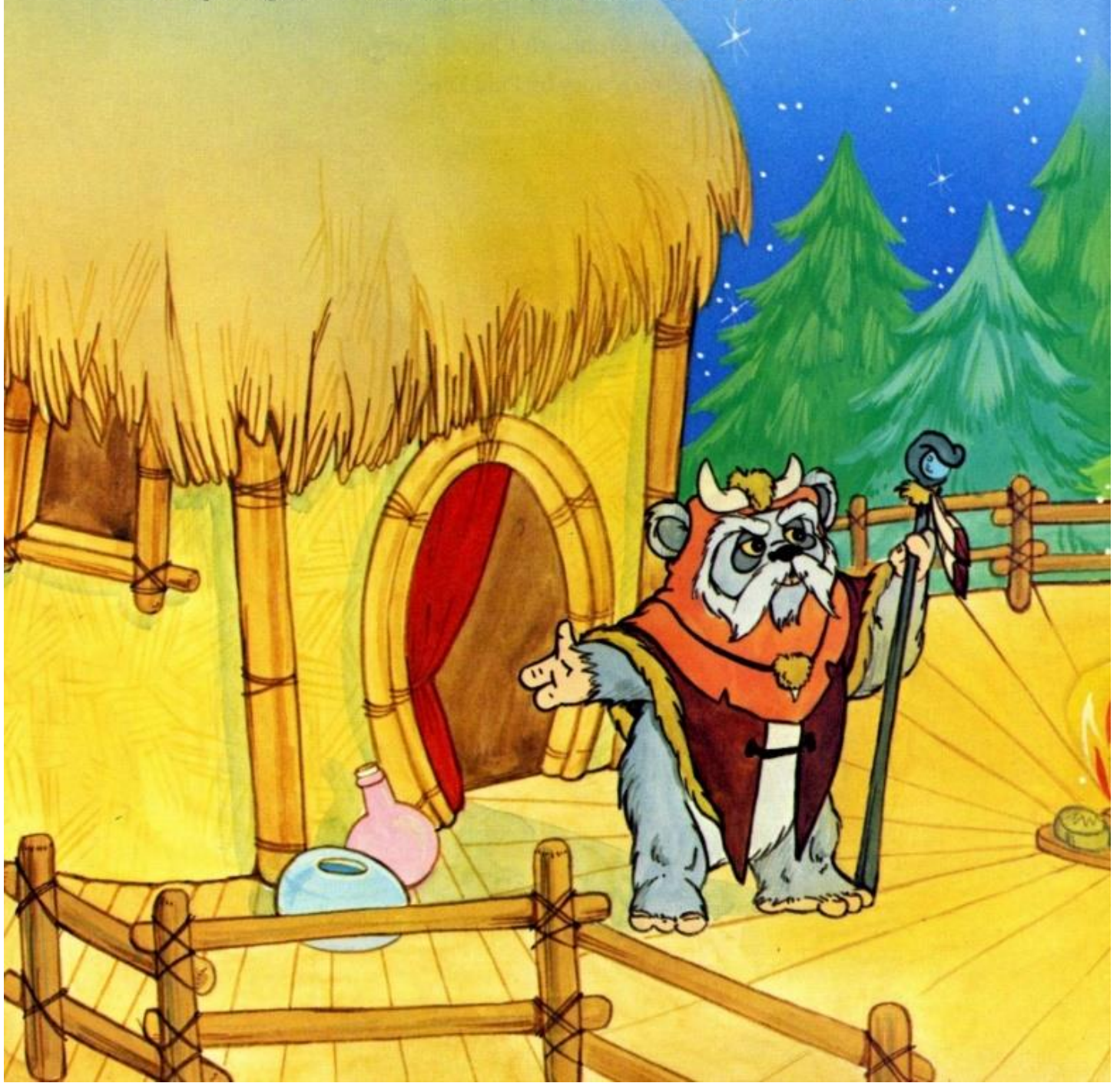
Deej hugged Wicket and everyone smiled at him. Wicket blushed as red as the berries he and Kneesaa had been gathering in the glade. And he was as happy as any young Ewok could ever be.

The Shadow Stone

It was a beautiful evening on the faraway moon of Endor, the lush forest home of the furry, peace-loving Ewoks. Darkness was falling softly around the Ewoks' tiny village of mud-and-stick huts nestled high in the tall trees. In the distance mysterious lights flickered and the cries of strange creatures echoed through the chilly night.

But in the bright light of the blazing firepit at the center of the village, the young Ewok children were cozy and warm. They listened eagerly as Chief Chirpa told them of Ewok legends—wonderful stories of great heroes, magic, and adventure. . . .

"Once there was a gemstone called the Sunstar/Shadow Stone," Chief Chirpa began. "Within this stone lay great magical powers—powers for



both good and evil. So strong was the stone's magic, in fact, that we Ewoks kept it hidden and rarely ever used it, lest we be tempted to misuse its great powers."

Chief Chirpa added another gnarled log to the fire, and as the dry wood began to burn, strange colors shimmered within the flames and smoke. "But there was one who wanted the stone and would do anything to get it. And that someone was—*Morag the Tulgah Witch!*"

"Oooh!" the children squealed in excitement and fear. For the wicked Morag had tormented many generations of Ewoks with her evil magic.

Chief Chirpa leaned forward and continued his story. "Morag used



witchcraft to steal the Sunstar/Shadow Stone from us. And only one young Ewok had the courage to fight her that day.”

“Did he beat the old witch?” Wicket asked eagerly.

“No,” Chief Chirpa replied. “With her powerful magic, Morag could have easily destroyed *him*. But instead she decided to make him her slave!”

“Oh, no!” cried Latara, her big eyes glistening with tears.

Chief Chirpa smiled. “Ah, but our young hero was cunning. While he spent many seasons as Morag’s prisoner, he secretly studied her ways of magic. And do you know what?”

“What?!” the Ewok children cried.





"The clever Ewok finally used some of Morag's own magic to get away!" Chief Chirpa said. Then he sighed. "In his struggle to escape, however, the Sunstar/Shadow Stone was broken in two. Morag snatched up the evil purple Shadow Stone for herself. And the Ewok managed to flee with the good half—the golden Sunstar—clutched safely to his heart."

Chief Chirpa lowered his eyes and stirred at the dying fire. "The two separate stones are not nearly as powerful now as when they were joined into one gemstone. So even though Morag possesses the Shadow Stone, she swears that she will not rest until she finds the Sunstar and makes it her own—forever!"

"But Chief Chirpa," said Teebo. "Whatever happened to the Sunstar? And the brave young Ewok?"

"Oh, the Sunstar is hidden here in our village. And the once young Ewok brave, well . . ." Chief Chirpa chuckled. "He's not so young anymore . . ."

The children followed Chief Chirpa's gaze toward a graying old Ewok wearing mystical charms and bone jewelry, hobbling across the square to his hut at the farthest edge of the village. It was the Ewoks' strange but wise old wizard.

"You mean it was Master Logray?" cried Wicket. "Aw, I don't believe it!"

"Why not?" said Teebo. "He performs such wonderful magic—I always knew he could do anything!" He watched the wizard disappear into the dark night. "Tell us more, Chief Chirpa!"

But by now many of the young Ewoks were yawning.

"I think it's time for all of you to go to sleep," said Chief Chirpa. "Good night, young ones. And pleasant dreams."

"Good story, huh?" Wicket said sleepily as he and Teebo walked together to their huts. "Who'd have figured old Logray was once a hero?"

"I would!" said Teebo. "Just think of all the fantastic things Logray





could teach a young Ewok!" He was so excited, he didn't feel one bit sleepy. Suddenly he had a wonderful idea. "That's it! Tomorrow I'm going to ask Logray if I can be his apprentice!"

"You? The future wizard of the village?" exclaimed Wicket. He gave his friend a playful poke. "Why, that's a laugh!"

"Oh, yeah?" answered Teebo. "Well, we'll just see how hard you laugh when I start to work *real* magic! I'll show *you*!" And off he marched to his own family's hut to go to sleep. But for a long time that night he lay awake, gazing through his open window at the stars above, imagining what secrets Logray might share with him the next day. Finally he drifted off into wonderful dreams of dancing firelight, golden gemstones, and magic. . . .

Early the next day Teebo stood nervously inside Logray's hut. It was filled with mysterious masks and feathered staffs and odd-shaped clay pots that held colored powders and potions. Teebo watched, wide-eyed, as the wizard stirred a big cauldron of fragrant liquid over the firepit in the center of the room.

"So you want to be my apprentice, eh?" Logray asked slowly.

"Yes!" said Teebo. "I've seen the way you make great magic. And last night Chief Chirpa told us about the time you beat old Morag the Tulgah Witch and rescued the Sunstar—all by yourself!"

"Oh, that, well . . ." Logray smiled a little, then shook his head. "That was a long, long time ago. But let me tell you this, young one. There's a lot more to magic than flashing lights and silly heroics!"



Slowly he sprinkled a careful half-pawful of green powder into the cauldron, then turned and stared deep into Teebo's eyes. "Magic is an art of patience. The study of the natural ways involves many years of the strictest devotion. Terrible things can happen to a young wizard who foolishly misuses his knowledge." Logray turned back to his cauldron and seemed lost in thought as he stirred and stirred the potion. Then he spoke to Teebo again. "A good wizard should rely on himself first, and magic second. You must be willing to spend long hours doing the simplest tasks before you are ready to work even your first spells."

"I'll do anything, master!" Teebo cried, his eyes shining.

"Very well, then," said Logray. "You can start by sweeping out the hut. After that, you can wash out all those gourds, sew that rip in the door-hide, dust off those masks, scrub the floor, and fetch me a lantern bird's nest."

"Yes, Master Logray," Teebo said, dashing to the corner for the broom.

A little while later Wicket and Kneesaa were walking across the village.

"Teebo sure sounded serious last night about becoming Logray's apprentice," said Wicket. "I wonder how his magic studies are coming."

"You're not the only one who's curious!" said Kneesaa. "Look!" She pointed to Logray's hut. Latara was standing outside it on tiptoe, trying to peek in through the window.

"Spying on Teebo, eh!" teased Wicket.

Latara spun around with a look of embarrassment on her face. "I wasn't spying. I was just . . . curious."

Suddenly they heard a muffled *whomp!* inside the hut, and a big cloud of smoke came billowing out the window! Then they heard another *whomp!* and another, and more smoke poured through the door.

"What's Teebo doing in there?" cried Kneesaa.

"Making lightning storms, I bet!" said Wicket.

"Or conjuring up monsters!" squealed Latara.

"Let's go!" they all shouted at once.



Eagerly they rushed into Logray's hut—and then burst out laughing. For there stood Teebo with dirt on his face, wearing an apron that was far too big for him and holding a crooked stick. And he wasn't working magic at all—he was beating a dusty old rug!

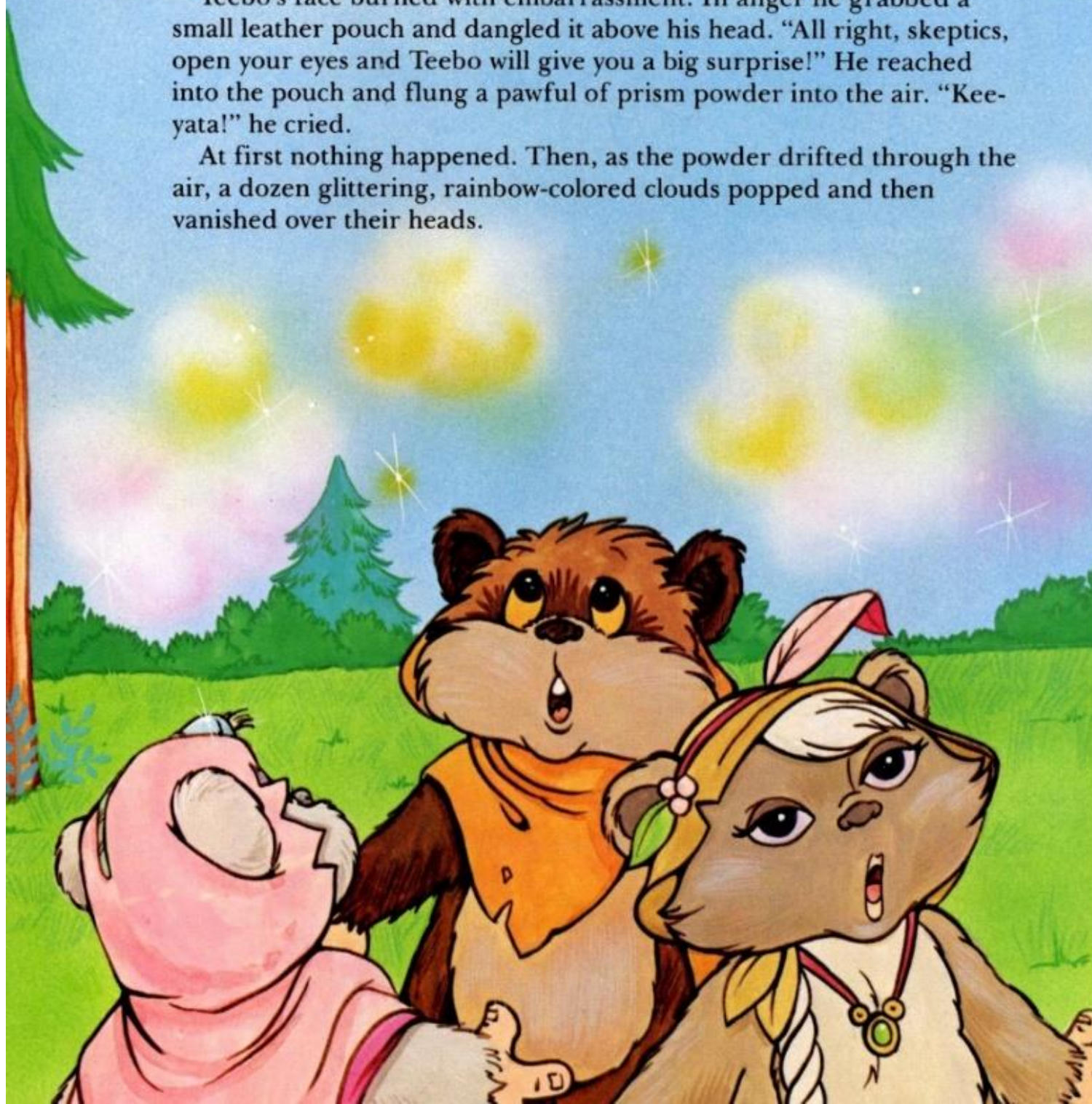
"Hi, guys," said Teebo. "What's so funny?"

"We . . . we thought you were casting spells," said Wicket. He was laughing so hard he could barely speak. "And here you are . . . cleaning house!"

"Some wizard!" said Latara, giggling.

Teebo's face burned with embarrassment. In anger he grabbed a small leather pouch and dangled it above his head. "All right, skeptics, open your eyes and Teebo will give you a big surprise!" He reached into the pouch and flung a pawful of prism powder into the air. "Kee-yata!" he cried.

At first nothing happened. Then, as the powder drifted through the air, a dozen glittering, rainbow-colored clouds popped and then vanished over their heads.



"Oooh, that's terrific!" cried Latara.

"Show us some more!" said Kneesaa. "That is, if you're sure Logray won't mind."

"Nah, he always lets me borrow his stuff," said Teebo. "But, um, just so we don't, uh, disturb anybody, let's go out into the forest. Can't be too careful with this magic, you know!"

Out in the forest, Teebo bowed grandly and prepared to show off his great skills of magic.

He waved Logray's ceremonial wand and—*poof!*—great puffs of prism powder rose from the pouch and zoomed into the air like little comets. He waved the wand again and Latara's flute danced on the wind—all by itself!—playing a mischievous little tune.





But, of course, Teebo didn't really know any magic. His lessons with Logray had not yet begun. So it wasn't long before everything started to go wrong!

Soon the air was *filled* with colored comets, and they whistled and popped as they bounced against each other. The air crackled! Lights flashed! Latara's flute crashed to the ground and broke in two. And a big colored comet zoomed down and knocked Kneesaa off her feet.

"My fur!" she cried. It was streaked with pink and yellow and purple and green from the prism powder.

Teebo tried to stop the comet. Instead it swirled around him and Wicket and swung them high into the air. Then it dropped them to the ground and twirled off into the sky—where it exploded like a hundred firecrackers.

Latara picked up her broken flute. Kneesaa tried to brush the colored powder from her fur.

"Come on, girls!" said Wicket. "Let's get away from this guy and his crazy magic!"

"Wait!" Teebo called, running after them. "I'll get it right this time. Please! Just give me—"

Suddenly a beautiful voice sang out across the forest. The children stopped.

"Look! Over there!" said Teebo.

In the distance a gentle golden light shone from a small cave. The children went up to it and looked in.

The entrance was hung with a curtain of sparkling gold. Before it sat a beautiful elflike maiden. She stopped her singing and smiled at them.

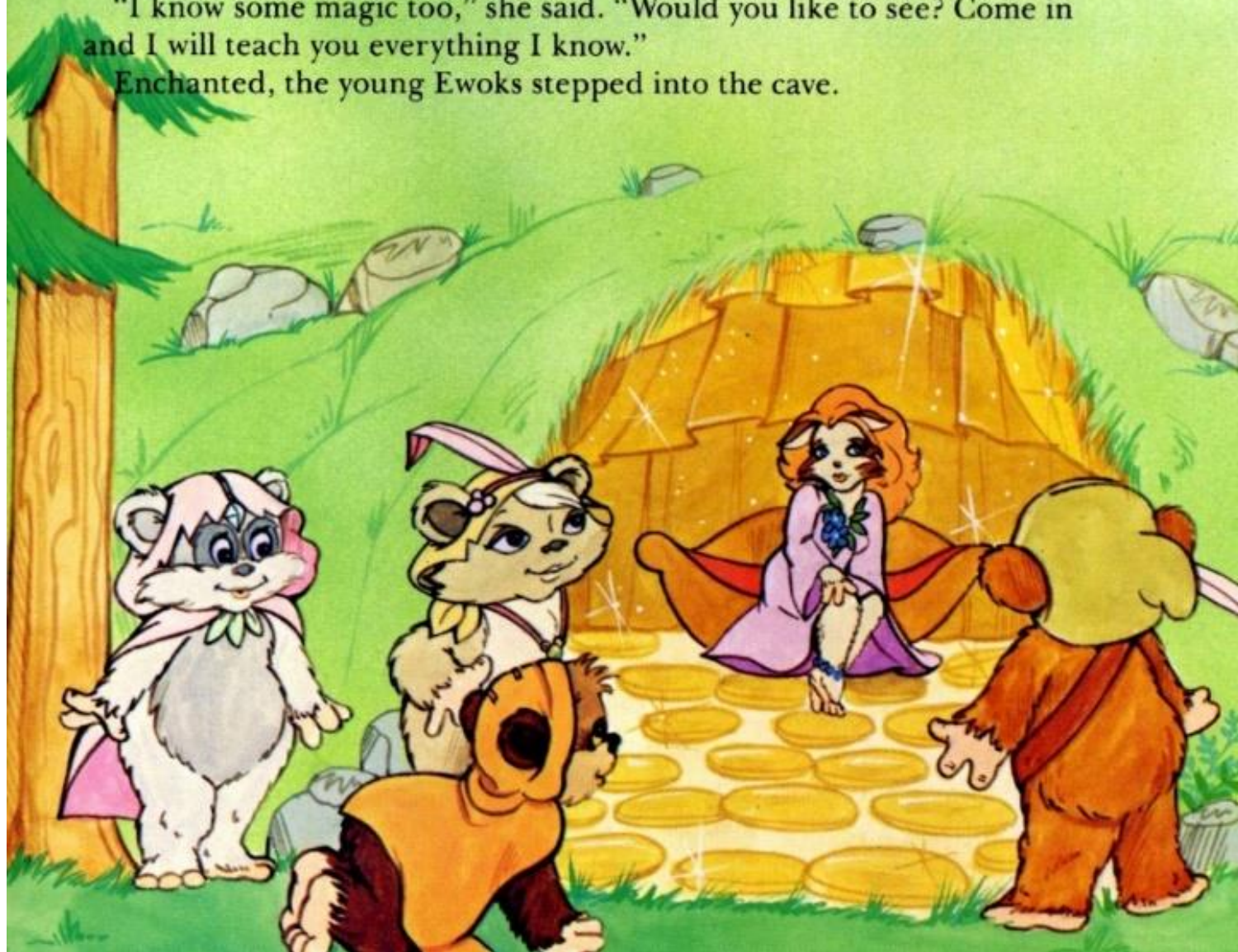
"Hello, little ones," she said sweetly. "Don't be afraid. Come nearer." The children crept a little closer.

"Who among you is the great wizard?" she asked. "Would that be you, my little friend?"

Teebo blushed. "Why . . . yes. That's me."

"I know some magic too," she said. "Would you like to see? Come in and I will teach you everything I know."

Enchanted, the young Ewoks stepped into the cave.



But as soon as the shining curtain closed behind them, everything changed. The sunny light faded into a chilly gray mist. The curtain turned into a mass of thick, sticky cobwebs. And there before them, instead of the beautiful maiden, stood—Morag the Tulgah Witch!



"Help!" cried the Ewoks. "Let us go! Let us go!"

But the witch just chuckled and shook her head. "No, my little ones. I need you to bring old Logray to me. Soon he will come searching for his foolish apprentice. And I" —her cackle echoed in the darkness of the cave— "I will be waiting for him. . . ."

Meanwhile Logray had returned to his hut. "Hmmm," he said, looking around. "Prism powder spilled everywhere, the hut still a mess—and both Teebo and my ceremonial wand are gone. Most unusual. . . ."

Just then Chief Chirpa entered with several men from the village. They seemed very upset. "Sorry to disturb you, Logray, but it's an emergency!" said Chief Chirpa.

"Our children are missing!" cried Wicket's father, Deej. "Wicket, Teebo, Kneesaa, and Latara have all disappeared."

"We can't find them anywhere!" said Warok, Teebo's father.

Suddenly, in a shadowed corner of the hut, Logray's crystal Image Spinner twirled to life. As the Ewoks stared in amazement, the image of a hooded face appeared in the spinning crystal.

"Morag!" cried Logray.

"Greetings, old friend," said the witch. "I'm pleased you still remember me!"

"Hah!" Logray exclaimed bitterly. "For many generations you have tried to destroy my people. How could I ever forget you—or your wicked ways?"

Morag cackled with evil delight. "But now I offer you an end to our feud," she said. "We shall make a friendly trade. Then all will be as it was before. Behold . . ."

Slowly the image in the spinning crystal changed. The fathers could now see Kneesaa and Latara imprisoned in a hanging iron cage and Wicket and Teebo chained to a rock. They were prisoners in Morag's fortress!

"No!" shouted Chief Chirpa.

"Our children!" cried Deej.

But the image faded and became Morag's ugly face again. "Logray," she said sternly, "bring me the Sunstar—*soon!*—or these cubs have seen their last sunrise!" Then the witch's horrible laugh melted away and the Image Spinner was dark once again.

For a moment the Ewoks stood in shocked silence. They were a race of gentle, peaceful creatures, and they rarely raised a weapon against any living thing. But Morag's evil deeds were too much to bear.

"We have no choice!" cried Chief Chirpa. "We must form an army and end Morag's evil ways forever!" All the others agreed loudly—except Logray.

"No," said the old wizard. The others looked at him in surprise. "It is I who must go. Alone."

"But our children's lives are at stake!" insisted Lumat, Latara's father.

"I fear for the young ones as well," said Logray. "But the Tulgah Witch would just use her magic to destroy us all if we attacked. Besides, I am the one she wants. Forgive me, my friends, but this is the only way." He picked up a small clay dish and threw its contents into the men's faces. As the sparkling dust swirled around their heads, their eyes closed and they fell into a deep sleep.

"Farewell," said Logray softly. "The tribe will need your courage if I fail."

Then Logray took down a simple clay figurine and smashed it upon the table. Inside was a beautiful golden gem. Its gentle glow filled the hut as Logray picked it up with reverence. "And now, Sunstar," he said bravely, "to our destiny!"





The first stars of twilight were just beginning to wink in the clear evening sky as Logray journeyed up the rocky lava trail to Mount Thunderstone.

Morag's fortress was built into a great smoking volcano. At the entrance two Yuzzum guards growled and raised their spears. In answer, Logray merely waved his magic staff. "Ka-toosha!" he whispered—and the two Yuzzums stood frozen to the spot! Calmly Logray entered Morag's fortress.

Into the darkness Logray hobbled, past steaming lava pits and twisted rock formations. Eerie colored lights rose from the bubbling pits and played on the cavern walls.

Suddenly Morag's voice screeched across the darkness: "Greetings, Logray! Welcome once again to my humble home!" She stepped from the shadows pushing Teebo, Wicket, Kneesaa, and Latara before her.



“Young ones—are you all right?” Logray asked.

“Yes, Master Logray,” answered Teebo. “But please forgive me. This is all my fault—”

“Hush, Teebo. We’ll talk of that later,” Logray said kindly. Then he faced his old enemy. “Well, Morag, I’ve come. Now let the children go.”

“Not so fast,” said the witch. “First I want the Sunstar.” She made a secret magical sign and the bumps on Logray’s wooden staff began to grow. Before he could act, thick vines encircled his legs and held him tight. He pulled the Sunstar from his pouch and waved it overhead. It flashed and the vines disappeared, leaving him free once more.

“So what?” mumbled the witch. Then she shouted out, “Seize the old fool!” Instantly several grotesque creatures crawled from the shadows and surrounded Logray. The children tried to help by throwing rocks and sticks. But when Logray flashed the Sunstar, the monsters fled, terrified, back into the darkness.

Morag stamped her big feet in anger. “So what? So what? You haven’t won yet!” she shrieked. With a furious jab of her magic staff, she sent a wave of thunder shuddering through the ground. The earth trembled and the Sunstar tumbled from Logray’s grasp. As it bounced across the

floor, Morag threw down her own staff, which held the purple Shadow Stone, and shouted toward the sky: "Let that which was broken be made whole again!"

The cave rumbled and the two stones blazed like the midday sun. The Ewoks hid their eyes. When they looked again, the two stones had joined together atop Morag's staff. Once more the Sunstar/Shadow Stone was a single majestic gem!

Morag snatched up her staff and swung it wildly through the air, sending bolts of power flashing and crashing through the cave. Where the bolts struck, the walls shook and rocks crumbled. "At last! It is mine—all mine!" she screamed.

"Morag—be careful!" cried Logray. "You'll set off the volcano and destroy the whole mountain!"

But Morag had gone mad with power and seemed not to hear. The magic of the Sunstar/Shadow Stone was hers once more, and she continued to display it recklessly for all to see. Suddenly the ground beneath her shuddered and then fell away with a great roar. She tumbled, shrieking, into a wide lava pit.



The Ewoks raced from the fortress, down the mountainside, and into a thicket of small trees. Pausing to rest, they looked back at the erupting volcano.

Through the smoke and flames something living moved. Slowly it stomped into the sunlight. It was Morag! But she was changed. The magic of the Sunstar/Shadow Stone had turned her into a giant monster—made of living, smoking lava! The Ewoks stared up at her in stunned horror.

“Feel my power now, Logray!” screamed the witch.

“Run!” Logray shouted to the children. “I must finish this!”



Then he stepped into the clearing and raised his magic staff at the monster. "I warn you, Morag, come no closer!"

"You threaten me with a stick! Haaa!" cried the witch. With a magical thunderbolt, she sent the staff flying out of Logray's hands.

When Teebo saw his beloved teacher in danger, he forgot his own fear and dashed into the clearing. He grabbed the staff. As thunderbolts whizzed around him, he ran as fast as he could to where Logray stood. Quickly Logray grasped the staff in both hands and with all his might thrust it deep into the ground.

"Is that the only attempt you make to save yourself?" Morag howled.





"You disappoint me, old friend." But as she lumbered toward Logray, a tremendous gusher of cold water shot out of the ground where the staff had broken the earth. Wherever the icy water splashed, the hot lava hardened into rock. Morag was being turned to stone!

"Lograaayyy!" she cried with the last of her strength, and as she lunged at her old enemy with outstretched arms, her hardening lava body cracked! Logray tried to scramble to safety, but it was too late. Morag the lava creature collapsed, and the brave Ewok wizard disappeared under tons of crumbling rock.

"Logray!" screamed the children. They ran to the remains of the crumbled monster. At first they stared in shock at the silent pile of stones. Then they burst into tears. Teebo hid his face in his hands. "It's all my fault," he said, sobbing.

Wicket, too, was crying, but he tried to comfort his friend. "There, there, Teebo. Just think, if you hadn't run out and thrown Logray's staff back to him, Morag would have destroyed us all. And probably our entire village, too. Now she's gone forever."

"And so is Master Logray!" Teebo said sadly.

But suddenly the pile of rocks began to tremble. As the children watched, astonished, a beautiful flowertree burst through the rubble. In minutes it grew tall and strong. And there, sitting in its topmost branches, was Logray—very much alive! In his hand he held the shining Sunstar/Shadow Stone.

"Greetings, young ones," he said.

Overjoyed, the young Ewoks ran to hug the wizard as he climbed down from the flowertree.

Then Teebo looked down in shame. "I'm sorry, Master Logray, for causing all this trouble. I failed you."

The old wizard looked at his student. After a moment he said, "True,





you did abuse the magic . . . but you were very brave to put yourself in danger to help me.”

“Then you’re not angry with me?” Teebo asked.

“Hmm, well, you did waste my prism powder,” Logray said sternly. “And wreck my ceremonial wand . . .” Then the wizard’s old face crinkled into a smile. “But we’ll talk about that later. For now we are safe and we have the Sunstar/Shadow Stone once more. Young ones—let’s go home!”

Some nights later Logray retold the story of the Sunstar/Shadow Stone to all the Ewok children who had gathered at the firepit in the center of the village.

“. . . And that,” he said, “is how the Sunstar/Shadow Stone was recaptured at last.”



"Master Logray," asked one tiny Ewok, "where is the gemstone now?"

"It is hidden away, here in the village," said Logray. "And very safely, too! As for the young apprentice and his friends," he added with a twinkle in his eye, "well, I'm not sure, but I think they lived happily ever after. Eh, Teebo?"

Teebo blushed, and then joined in the laughter as Logray patted him on the back.

As a special treat that evening, Logray threw a large pawful of prism powder into the fire. It crackled in the flames and then sparkled up into the beautiful night sky, rivaling the brilliance of the stars. For some time afterward it cast glowing rainbow-colored shadows over the Ewok village, lighting the way as the children returned to their huts, climbed into bed, and fell asleep, dreaming of their wonderful Ewok legends. . . .

Wickets Wagon

Weechee, Willie and Wicket trudge through the forest in the pouring rain. Eventually Wicket finds a cave to shelter in.
'Over here you guys,' he calls.
'It looks kind of spooky,' says Willie.

Wicket peers into the cave which turns out to be a huge, old, broken-down battle wagon. In the middle of the wagon is a large stone block with writing on it.

'What's it say Wicket?' asks Weechee.

'Something about a great battle fought long ago between Ewoks and Dulocks, won thanks to the bravery and cleverness of our great-grandfather Erpham Warrick. Hey!'

Suddenly up pops Kaink, the tree-priestess, also looking for shelter. She starts to tell the Ewoks about the battle wagon.

'Hundreds of years ago, the Dulocks came to destroy that which is most precious to our tribe . . . Our soul trees.'

'Erpham Warrick built this war wagon which led the Ewoks to victory. The soul trees were saved and the Dulocks were driven into the swamp.'

'Hey, what a story, let's rebuild the wagon,' shouts Wicket.

'I've got the plans, it shouldn't be too difficult,' adds Kaink.

But their conversation has been overheard by a Dulock scout, who rushes back to King Gorneesh's palace to tell him.

'Hmm, a battle wagon you say. Why should those Ewok brats want to build something like that? Shaman get in here, fast.'

So anxious is the Shaman to get to Gorneesh that he accidentally kicks a bucket, sending it flying through the air onto Gorneesh's head.

'Grrr, get out of here, you blundering feather-brained dung heap! And don't come back until you've found out about the battle wagon.'

'What's your hurry,' asks Urgah of the Shaman who has crashed into a tree.

'His Awfulness wants me to find out about some silly battle wagon.'

'Why not just ask Murgooob the oracle,' suggests Urgah, 'and I'll come with you because I've never seen him before.'

Shaman and Urgah climb Murgoob's stump carefully.

'Er, Great and Powerful Murgoob, we need your advice on this battle wagon the Ewoks are building.'

'Arrgh! How I'd love to get my hands on it. Many moons ago they destroyed Dulocks with it. If we could get it, we'd rule the forest forever! Ha ha!'

Later, Gorneesh, Shaman and the scout are watching the Ewoks rebuild the wagon.

'There are only three of them, why don't we just go over and take it,' says the scout.

'Not now roothed, not until they've finished fixing it.'

A few days later the wagon is finished. Exhausted, Wicket sits down and falls asleep.

The Dulocks tiptoe up to the wagon unaware that Wicket is asleep inside. But he soon awakes and jumps onto the roof followed by the Dulock scout.

'Grab him.'

Wicket jumps off. The wagon rolls down a small hill, the Dulocks chase it.

'You can't take that! Come back!' yells Wicket.

He runs to the village and bangs the alarm drum.

'What's the matter?' yell the Ewoks.

'The Dulocks have stolen the battle wagon.'

'So what,' says Chirpa. 'That old thing, I'm sorry you lost it Wicket, but I don't think the Dulocks are smart enough to figure out how it works. So everyone can go back to their huts.'

Poor Wicket.

Wicket wanders off sadly. He stops in front of an immense redwood tree.

'This must be great grandfather's soul tree,' he thinks, and starts to talk to it apologising for messing things up.

'You should never apologise for trying hard. You should never quit once you put your mind to something,' the tree says to him.

'You're right, I'll get the wagon back somehow.'

Wicket runs to Murgoob's stump and hides in some weeds. He sees the Dulocks gathering ready to fight the Ewoks with their new wagon.

He overhears Shaman pleading with Murgoob to come with them for luck but he has not been out for 600 years and is reluctant.

This gives Wicket an idea.

'Nobody will know what Murgoob looks like, so I'll disguise myself as the oracle,' thinks Wicket, ducking under water.

He emerges covered in weeds and moss looking exactly like Murgoob.

The Dulocks are preparing for battle when Wicket, disguised as Murgoob, approaches.

'Ah, the oracle,' cries Gorneesh, 'which way should we go?'

'That way,' and with a push the wagon heads full speed towards the river.

'What a bunch of Lurdoes,' thinks Wicket. 'I gotta warn the village.'

The Dulocks start to scream, as they realise they are going to fall into the river.

Awoken by the commotion, the real Murgoob appears.

'What's all the noise about?' he yells.

'Oh dear,' says Wicket, as the Dulocks pounce on him.

Wicket is shoved into a little cage on the wagon, which is being pushed into battle accompanied by the raucous Dulock war chant.

The wagon passes the hidden Kneesaa, Latara, and Woklings.

'Look out,' shouts Wicket.

'They've got Wicket, we must rescue him,' shout the Ewoks, running back to the village.

The Dulocks reach the village and stop in front of the Ewoks.

'I hope you don't mind us borrowing your wagon, har har. We just thought we'd come and test it out . . . by smashing your soul trees to bits,' shouts Gorneesh.

'I warn you Dulock. Stand down from the wagon and release my people. We'll fight to the last Ewok to save our soul trees,' shouts Chirpa.
'Well that shouldn't take long, har, har,' sneers Gorneesh. 'Dulocks, charge!' The Ewoks scatter.

But the Ewoks are far nimbler than the clumsy Dulocks and Malani, riding Baga the ox, soon catches up with the wagon and releases Wicket from his cage.

The wagon is now travelling very fast indeed and Dulocks are falling off left right and centre, all that is except Gorneesh who is desperately trying to smash Wicket and Malani over the head with a club. But Malani and Wicket push him away.

'One step closer Gorneesh and I'll pull this main support peg and the wagon will collapse.'
'You're bluffing!' 'Try me,' Wicket replies as he pulls the pin.
The wagon careers out of control, the Ewoks jump clear and the battle wagon crashes in a heap.
The Dulocks retreat.

After the celebrations Malani says to Wicket, 'We've got a surprise for you.'
There in front of them is the battle wagon, shining like new.
'To thank you for having the courage to follow a vision that only you saw at first!'

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